

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 17

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On Presumption

There is another sort of glory, which is the having too good an opinion of our own worth. 'Tis an inconsiderate affection with which we flatter ourselves, and that represents us to ourselves other than we truly are: like the passion of love, that lends beauties and graces to the object, and makes those who are caught by it, with a depraved and corrupt judgment, consider the thing which they love other and more perfect than it is.

I would not, nevertheless, for fear of failing on this side, that a man should not know himself aright, or think himself less than he is; the judgment ought in all things to maintain its rights; 'tis all the reason in the world he should discern in himself, as well as in others, what truth sets before him; if it be Caesar, let him boldly think himself the greatest captain in the world. We are nothing but ceremony: ceremony carries us away, and we leave the substance of things: we hold by the branches, and quit the trunk and the body; we have taught the ladies to blush when they hear that but named which they are not at all afraid to do: we dare not call our members by their right names, yet are not afraid to employ them in all sorts of debauchery: ceremony forbids us to express by words things that are lawful and natural, and we obey it: reason forbids us to do things unlawful and ill, and nobody obeys it. I find myself here fettered by the laws of ceremony; for it neither permits a man to speak well of himself, nor ill: we will leave her there for this time.

They whom fortune (call it good or ill) has made to, pass their lives in some eminent degree, may by their public actions manifest what they are; but they whom she has only employed in the crowd, and of whom nobody will say a word unless they speak themselves, are to be excused if they take the boldness to speak of themselves to such as are interested to know them; by the example of Lucilius:

*Ille velut fidis arcana sodalibus olim
Credebat libris, neque si male cesserat, usquam
Decurrens alio, neque si bene: quo fit, ut omnis,*

He formerly confided his secret thoughts to his books, as to tried friends, and for good and evil, resorted not elsewhere: hence it

*Ille velut fidis arcana sodalibus olim
Credebat libris, neque si male cesserat, usquam*

he always committed to paper his actions and thoughts, and there portrayed himself such as he found himself to be. *Nec id Rutilio et Scauro citra fidem; aut obtreactioni fuit.*

I remember, then, that from my infancy there was observed in me I know not what kind of carriage and behavior, that seemed to relish of pride and arrogance. I will say this, by the way, that it is not unreasonable to suppose that we have qualities and inclinations so much our own, and so incorporate in us, that we have not the means to feel and recognize them: and of such natural inclinations the body will retain a certain bent, without our knowledge or consent. It was an affectation conformable with his beauty that made Alexander carry his head on one side, and caused Alcibiades to lisp; Julius Caesar scratched his head with one finger, which is the fashion of a man full of troublesome thoughts; and Cicero, as I remember, was wont to pucker up his nose, a sign of a man given to scoffing; such motions as these may imperceptibly happen in us. There are other artificial ones which I meddle not with, as salutations and congees, by which men acquire, for the most part unjustly, the reputation of being humble and courteous: one may be humble out of pride. I am prodigal enough of my hat, especially in summer, and never am so saluted but that I pay it again from persons of what quality soever, unless they be in my own service. I should make it my request to some princes whom I know, that they would be more sparing of that ceremony, and bestow that courtesy where it is more due; for being so indiscreetly and indifferently conferred on all, it is thrown away to no purpose; if it be without respect of persons, it loses its effect. Among irregular deportment, let us not forget that haughty one of the Emperor Constantius, who always in public held his head upright and stiff, without bending or turning on either side, not so much as to look upon those who saluted him on one side, planting his body in a rigid immovable posture, without suffering it to yield to the motion of his coach, not daring so much as to spit, blow his nose, or wipe his face before people.

I know not whether the gestures that were observed in me were of this first quality, and whether I had really any occult proneness to this vice, as it might well be; and I cannot be responsible for the motions of the body; but as to the motions of the soul, I must here confess what I think of the matter.

This glory consists of two parts; the one in setting too great a value upon ourselves, and the other in setting too little a value upon others. As to the one, methinks these considerations ought, in the first place, to be of some force: I feel myself importuned by an error of the soul that displeases me, both as it is unjust, and still more as it is troublesome; I attempt to correct it, but I cannot root it out; and this is, that I lessen the just value of things that I possess, and overvalue things, because they are foreign, absent, and none of mine; this humor spreads very far. As the prerogative of the authority makes husbands look upon their own wives with a vicious disdain, and many fathers their children; so I, betwixt two equal merits, should always be swayed against my own; not so much that the jealousy of

came to pass, that the old man's life is there all seen as on a votive tablet.

• HOR., SAT., 2.1.30

Nor was this considered a breach of good faith or a disparagement to Rutilius or Scaurus. • TAC., AGR., 1

my advancement and bettering troubles my judgment, and hinders me from satisfying myself, as that of itself possession begets a contempt of what it holds and rules. Foreign governments, manners, and languages insinuate themselves into my esteem; and I am sensible that Latin allures me by the favor of its dignity to value it above its due, as it does with children, and the common sort of people: the domestic government, house, horse, of my neighbor, though no better than my own, I prize above my own, because they are not mine. Besides that I am very ignorant in my own affairs, I am struck by the assurance that every one has of himself: whereas there is scarcely anything that I am sure I know, or that I dare be responsible to myself that I can do: I have not my means of doing anything in condition and ready, and am only instructed therein after the effect; as doubtful of my own force as I am of another's. Whence it comes to pass that if I happen to do anything commendable, I attribute it more to my fortune than industry, forasmuch as I design everything by chance and in fear. I have this, also, in general, that of all the opinions antiquity has held of men in gross, I most willingly embrace and adhere to those that most condemn and undervalue us, and most push us to naught; methinks, philosophy has never so fair a game to play as when it falls upon our vanity and presumption; when it most lays open our irresolution, weakness, and ignorance. I look upon the too good opinion that man has of himself to be the nursing mother of all the most false opinions, both public and private. Those people who ride astride upon the epicycle of Mercury, who see so far into the heavens, are worse to me than a tooth-drawer that comes to draw my teeth; for in my study, the subject of which is man, finding so great a variety of judgments, so profound a labyrinth of difficulties, one upon another, so great diversity and uncertainty, even in the school of wisdom itself, you may judge, seeing these people could not resolve upon the knowledge of themselves and their own condition, which is continually before their eyes, and within them, seeing they do not know how that moves which they themselves move, nor how to give us a description of the springs they themselves govern and make use of, how can I believe them about the ebbing and flowing of the Nile? The curiosity of knowing things has been given to man for a scourge, says the Holy Scripture.

But to return to what concerns myself; I think it would be very difficult for any other man to have a meaner opinion of himself; nay, for any other to have a meaner opinion of me than of myself.

I look upon myself as one of the common sort, saving in this, that I have no better an opinion of myself; guilty of the meanest and most popular defects, but not disowning or excusing them; and I do not value myself upon any other account than because I know my own value. If there be any vanity in the case, 'tis superficially infused into me by the treachery of my complexion, and has no body that my judgment can discern.

I am sprinkled, but not dyed.

For in truth, as to the effects of the mind, there is no part of me, be it what it will, with which I am satisfied; and the approbation of others makes me not think the better of myself. My judgment is tender and nice, especially in things that concern myself. I ever repudiate myself, and feel

myself float and waver by reason of my weakness. I have nothing of my own that satisfies my judgment. My sight is clear and regular enough, but, at working, it is apt to dazzle; as I most manifestly find in poetry: I love it infinitely, and am able to give a tolerable judgment of other men's works; but, in good earnest, when I apply myself to it, I play the child, and am not able to endure myself. A man may play the fool in everything else, but not in poetry,

*mediocribus esse poetis
Non dii, non homines, non concessere columnæ.*

I would to God this sentence was written over the doors of all our printers, to forbid the entrance of so many rhymesters!

*verum
Nihil securius est malo poetæ.*

Why have not we such people? Dionysius the father valued himself upon nothing so much as his poetry; at the Olympic games, with chariots surpassing all the others in magnificence, he sent also poets and musicians to present his verses, with tent and pavilions royally gilt and hung with tapestry. When his verses came to be recited, the excellence of the delivery at first attracted the attention of the people; but when they afterward came to poise the meanness of the composition, they first entered into disdain, and continuing to nettle their judgments, presently proceeded to fury, and ran to pull down and tear to pieces all his pavilions: and, that his chariots neither performed anything to purpose in the race, and that the ship which brought back his people failed of making Sicily, and was by the tempest driven and wrecked upon the coast of Tarentum, they certainly believed was through the anger of the gods, incensed, as they themselves were, against the paltry Poem; and even the mariners who escaped from the wreck seconded this opinion of the people: to which also the oracle that foretold his death seemed to subscribe; which was, "that Dionysius should be near his end, when he should have overcome those who were better than himself," which he interpreted of the Carthaginians, who surpassed him in power; and having war with them, often declined the victory, not to incur the sense of this prediction; but he understood it ill; for the god indicated the time of the advantage, that by favor and injustice he obtained at Athens over the tragic poets, better than himself, having caused his own play called the Leneians to be acted in emulation; presently after which victory he died, and partly of the excessive joy he conceived at the success.

What I find tolerable of mine, is not so really and in itself, but in comparison of other worse things, that I see well enough received. I envy the happiness of those who can please and hug themselves in what they do; for 'tis an easy thing to be so pleased, because a man extracts that pleasure from himself, especially if he be constant in his self-conceit. I know a poet, against whom the intelligent and the ignorant, abroad and at home, both heaven and earth exclaim that he has but very little notion of it; and yet, for all that, he has never a whit the worse opinion of himself; but is always falling upon some new piece, always contriving some new

Neither men, nor gods, nor the pillars (on which the poets offered their writings) permit mediocrity in poets. • HOR., ARS P., 372

The truth is, that nothing is more confident than a bad poet. • MART., 12.63.13

invention, and still persists in his opinion, by so much the more obstinately, as it only concerns him to maintain it. My works are so far from pleasing me, that as often as I review them, they disgust me:

*Cum relego, scripsisse pudet; quia plurima cerno,
Me quoque, qui feci, iudice, digna lini.*

I have always an idea in my soul, and a sort of disturbed image which presents me as in a dream with a better form than that I have made use of; but I cannot catch it nor fit it to my purpose; and even that idea is but of the meaner sort. Hence I conclude that the productions of those great and rich souls of former times are very much beyond the utmost stretch of my imagination or my wish; their writings do not only satisfy and fill me, but they astound me, and ravish me with admiration; I judge of their beauty; I see it, if not to the utmost, yet so far at least as 'tis possible for me to aspire. Whatever I undertake, I owe a sacrifice to the Graces, as Plutarch says of some one, to conciliate their favor:

*si quid enim placet,
Si quid dulce hominum sensibus influit,
Debentur lepidis omnia Gratiis.*

They abandon me throughout; all I write is rude; polish and beauty are wanting: I cannot set things off to any advantage; my handling adds nothing to the matter; for which reason I must have it forcible, very full, and that has lustre of its own. If I pitch upon subjects that are popular and gay, 'tis to follow my own inclination, who do not affect a grave and ceremonious wisdom, as the world does; and to make myself more sprightly, but not my style more wanton, which would rather have them grave and severe; at least if I may call that a style which is an inform and irregular way of speaking, a popular jargon, a proceeding without definition, division, conclusion, perplexed like that Amafanius and Rabirius. I can neither please nor delight, nor even tickle my readers: the best story in the world is spoiled by my handling, and becomes flat; I cannot speak but in rough earnest, and am totally unprovided of that facility which I observe in many of my acquaintance, of entertaining the first comers and keeping a whole company in breath, or taking up the ear of a prince with all sorts of discourse without wearying themselves: they never want matter by reason of the faculty and grace they have in taking hold of the first thing that starts up, and accommodating it to the humor and capacity of those with whom they have to do. Princes do not much affect solid discourses, nor I to tell stories. The first and easiest reasons, which are commonly the best taken, I know not how to employ: I am an ill orator to the common sort. I am apt of everything to say the extremest that I know. Cicero is of opinion that in treatises of philosophy the exordium is the hardest part; if this be true, I am wise in sticking to the conclusion.

And yet we are to know how to wind the string to all notes, and the sharpest is that which is the most seldom touched. There is at least as much perfection in elevating an empty as in supporting a weighty thing. A man must sometimes superficially handle things, and sometimes push them home. I know very well that most men keep themselves in this lower

When I reperuse, I blush at what I have written; I ever see one passage after another that I, the author, being the judge, consider should be erased. • OV., PONT., 1.5.15

If anything please that I write, if it infuse delight into men's minds, all is due to the charming Graces.

form from not conceiving things otherwise than by this outward bark; but I likewise know that the greatest masters, and Xenophon and Plato are often seen to stoop to this low and popular manner of speaking and treating of things, but supporting it with graces which never fail them.

Farther, my language has nothing in it that is facile and polished; 'tis rough, free, and irregular, and as such pleases, if not my judgment, at all events my inclination, but I very well perceive that I sometimes give myself too much rein, and that by endeavoring to avoid art and affectation I fall into the other inconvenience:

*brevis esse laboro,
Obscurus fio.*

Endeavoring to be brief, I become
obscure. • HOR., ARS P., 25

Plato says, that the long or the short are not properties, that either take away or give value to language.

Should I attempt to follow the other more moderate, united, and regular style, I should never attain to it; and though the short round periods of Sallust best suit with my humor, yet I find Caesar much grander and harder to imitate; and though my inclination would rather prompt me to imitate Seneca's way of writing, yet I do nevertheless more esteem that of Plutarch. Both in doing and speaking I simply follow my own natural way; whence, peradventure, it falls out that I am better at speaking than writing. Motion and action animate words, especially in those who lay about them briskly, as I do, and grow hot. The comportment, the countenance; the voice, the robe, the place, will set off some things that of themselves would appear no better than prating. Messalla complains in Tacitus of the straitness of some garments in his time, and of the fashion of the benches where the orators were to declaim, that were a disadvantage to their eloquence.

My French tongue is corrupted, both in the pronunciation and otherwise, by the barbarism of my country. I never saw a man who was a native of any of the provinces on this side of the kingdom who had not a twang of his place of birth, and that was not offensive to ears that were purely French. And yet it is not that I am so perfect in my Perigordian: for I can no more speak it than High Dutch, nor do I much care. 'Tis a language (as the rest about me on every side, of Poitou, Saintonge, Angoumois, Limousin, Auvergne), a poor, drawling, scurvy language. There is, indeed, above us toward the mountains a sort of Gascon spoken, that I am mightily taken with: blunt, brief, significant, and in truth a more manly and military language than any other I am acquainted with, as sinewy, powerful, and pertinent as the French is graceful, neat, and luxuriant.

As to the Latin, which was given me for my mother tongue, I have by discontinuance lost the use of speaking it, and, indeed, of writing it too, wherein I formerly had a particular reputation, by which you may see how inconsiderable I am on that side.

Beauty is a thing of great recommendation in the correspondence among men; 'tis the first means of acquiring the favor and good liking of one

another, and no man is so barbarous and morose as not to perceive himself in some sort struck with its attraction. The body has a great share in our being, has an eminent place there, and therefore its structure and composition are of very just consideration. They who go about to disunite and separate our two principal parts from one another are to blame; we must, on the contrary, reunite and rejoin them. We must command the soul not to withdraw and entertain itself apart, not to despise and abandon the body (neither can she do it but by some apish counterfeit), but to unite herself close to it, to embrace, cherish, assist, govern, and advise it, and to bring it back and set it into the true way when it wanders; in sum, to espouse and be a husband to it, so that their effects may not appear to be diverse and contrary, but uniform and concurring. Christians have a particular instruction concerning this connection, for they know that the Divine justice embraces this society and juncture of body and soul, even to the making the body capable of eternal rewards; and that God has an eye to the whole man's ways, and wills that he receive entire chastisement or reward according to his demerits or merits.

The sect of the Peripatetics, of all sects the most sociable, attribute to wisdom this sole care equally to provide for the good of these two associate parts: and the other sects, in not sufficiently applying themselves to the consideration of this mixture, show themselves to be divided, one for the body and the other for the soul, with equal error, and to have lost sight of their subject, which is Man, and their guide, which they generally confess to be Nature.

The first distinction that ever was among men, and the first consideration that gave some pre-eminence over others, 'tis likely was the advantage of beauty:

*agros divisere atque dedere
Pro facie cujusque, et viribus ingenioque;
Nam facies multum valuit, viresque vigeant.*

Now I am of something lower than the middle stature, a defect that not only borders upon deformity, but carries withal a great deal of inconvenience along with it, especially for those who are in office and command; for the authority which a graceful presence and a majestic mien beget is wanting.

C. Marius did not willingly enlist any soldiers who were not six feet high. The Courtier has, indeed, reason to desire a moderate stature in the gentlemen he is setting forth, rather than any other, and to reject all strangeness that should make him be pointed at. But if I were to choose whether this medium must be rather below than above the common standard, I would not have it so in a soldier.

Little men, says Aristotle, are pretty, but not handsome; and greatness of soul is discovered in a great body, as beauty is in a conspicuous stature: the Ethiopians and Indians, says he, in choosing their kings and magistrates, had regard to the beauty and stature of their persons. They had reason; for

They distributed and conferred the lands to every man according to his beauty and strength and understanding, for beauty was much esteemed and strength was in favor. •
LUCR., 5.1109

it creates respect in those who follow them, and is a terror to the enemy, to see a leader of a brave and goodly stature march at the head of a battalion:

*Ipse inter primos praestanti corpore Turnus
Vertitur arma, tenens, et toto vertice supra est.*

Our holy and heavenly king, of whom every circumstance is most carefully and with the greatest religion and reverence to be observed, has not himself rejected bodily recommendation, *speciosus forma prae filiis hominum*.

And Plato, together with temperance and fortitude, requires beauty in the conservators of his republic.

It would vex you that a man should apply himself to you among your servants to inquire where Monsieur is, and that you should only have the remainder of the compliment of the hat that is made to your barber or your secretary; as it happened to poor Philopoemen, who arriving the first of all his company at an inn where he was expected, the hostess, who knew him not, and saw him an unsightly fellow, employed him to go help her maids a little to draw water, and make a fire against Philopoemen's coming; the gentlemen of his train arriving presently after, and surprised to see him busy in this fine employment, for he failed not to obey his landlady's command, asked him what he was doing there: "I am," said he, "paying the penalty of my ugliness."

The other beauties belong to women; the beauty of stature is the only beauty of men. Where there is a contemptible stature, neither the largeness and roundness of the forehead, nor the whiteness and sweetness of the eyes, nor the moderate proportion of the nose, nor the littleness of the ears and mouth, nor the evenness and whiteness of the teeth, nor the thickness of a well-set brown beard, shining like the husk of a chestnut, nor curled hair, nor the just proportion of the head, nor a fresh complexion, nor a pleasing air of a face, nor a body without any offensive scent, nor the just proportion of limbs, can make a handsome man.

I am, as to the rest, strong and well knit; my face is not puffed, but full, and my complexion betwixt jovial and melancholic, moderately sanguine and hot,

Unde rigent setis mihi crura, et pectora villis;

my health vigorous and sprightly, even to a well advanced age, and rarely troubled with sickness. Such I was, for I do not now make any account of myself, now that I am engaged in the avenues of old age, being already past forty:

*minutatim vires et robur adultum
Frangit, et in partem pejorem liquitur aetas.*

what shall be from this time forward, will be but a half-being, and no more me: I every day escape and steal away from myself,

In the first rank marches Turnus,
brandishing his weapon, taller by a
head than all the rest. • VERG.,
AEN., 7.783

He is fairer than the children of men.
• PSALM, 14.3

Whence 'tis my legs and breast
bristle with hair. • MART., 2.36.5

Time by degrees breaks our
strength and makes us grow feeble.
• LUCR., 2.1131

Singula de nobis anni praedantur euntes.

Agility and address I never had, and yet am the son of a very active and sprightly father, who continued to be so to an extreme old age. I have scarce known any man of his condition, his equal in all bodily exercises, as I have seldom met with any who have not excelled me, except in running, at which I was pretty good. In music or singing, for which I have a very unfit voice, or to play on any sort of instrument, they could never teach me anything. In dancing, tennis, or wrestling, I could never arrive to more than an ordinary pitch; in swimming, fencing, vaulting, and leaping, to none at all. My hands are so clumsy that I cannot even write so as to read it myself, so that I had rather do what I have scribbled over again, than take upon me the trouble to make it out. I do not read much better than I write, and feel that I weary my auditors otherwise (I am) not a bad clerk. I cannot decently fold up a letter, nor could ever make a pen, or carve at table worth a pin, nor saddle a horse, nor carry a hawk and fly her, nor hunt the dogs, nor lure a hawk, nor speak to a horse.

In fine, my bodily qualities are very well suited to those of my soul; there is nothing sprightly, only a full and firm vigor: I am patient enough of labor and pains, but it is only when I go voluntary to work, and only so long as my own desire prompts me to it,

Molliter austerum studio fallente laborem.

Otherwise, if I am not allured with some pleasure, or have other guide than my own pure and free inclination, I am good for nothing: for I am of a humor that, life and health excepted, there is nothing for which I will bite my nails, and that I will purchase at the price of torment of mind and constraint,

*tanti mihi non sit opaci
Omnis arena Tagi, quodque in mare volvitur aurum.*

Extremely idle, extremely given up to my own inclination both by nature and art, I would as willingly lend a man my blood as my pains.

I have a soul free and entirely its own, and accustomed to guide itself after its own fashion; having hitherto never had either master or governor imposed upon me: I have walked as far as I would, and at the pace that best pleased myself; this is it that has rendered me unfit for the service of others, and has made me of no use to any one but myself. Nor was there any need of forcing my heavy and lazy disposition; for being born to such a fortune as I had reason to be contented with (a reason, nevertheless, that a thousand others of my acquaintance would have rather made use of for a plank upon which to pass over in search of higher fortune, to tumult and disquiet), and with as much intelligence as I required, I sought for no more, and also got no more:

*Non agimur tumidis velis Aquilone secundo;
Non tamen adversis aetatem ducimus austris:
Viribus, ingenio, specie, virtute, loco, re,
Extremi primorum, extremis usque priores.*

Of the fleeting years each steals
something from me. • HOR., EPIST., 2.2

Study softly beguiling severe labor. •
HOR., SAT., 2.2.12

I would not buy rich Tagus sands so
dear, nor all the gold that lies in the
sea. • JUV., 3.54

The northern wind does not agitate
our sails; nor Auster trouble our
course with storms. In strength,
talent, figure, virtue, honor, wealth,

I had only need of what was sufficient to content me: which nevertheless is a government of soul, to take it right, equally difficult in all sorts of conditions, and that, of custom, we see more easily found in want than in abundance: forasmuch, peradventure, as according to the course of our other passions, the desire of riches is more sharpened by their use than by the need of them: and the virtue of moderation more rare than that of patience; and I never had anything to desire, but happily to enjoy the estate that God by His bounty had put into my hands. I have never known anything of trouble, and have had little to do in anything but the management of my own affairs: or, if I have, it has been upon condition to do it at my own leisure and after my own method; committed to my trust by such as had a confidence in me, who did not importune me, and who knew my humor; for good horsemen will make shift to get service out of a rusty and broken-winded jade.

Even my infancy was trained up after a gentle and free manner, and exempt from any rigorous subjection. All this has helped me to a complexion delicate and incapable of solicitude, even to that degree that I love to have my losses and the disorders wherein I am concerned, concealed from me. In the account of my expenses, I put down what my negligence costs me in feeding and maintaining it,

*hæc nempe supersunt,
Quæ dominum fallunt, quæ prosunt furibus.*

I love not to know what I have, that I may be less sensible of my loss; I entreat those who serve me, where affection and integrity are absent, to deceive me with something like a decent appearance. For want of constancy enough to support the shock of adverse accidents to which we are subject, and of patience seriously to apply myself to the management of my affairs, I nourish as much as I can this in myself, wholly leaving all to fortune “to take all things at the worst, and to resolve to bear that worst with temper and patience”; that is the only thing I aim at, and to which I apply my whole meditation.

In a danger, I do not so much consider how I shall escape it, as of how little importance it is, whether I escape it or no: should I be left dead upon the place, what matter? Not being able to govern events, I govern myself, and apply myself to them, if they will not apply themselves to me. I have no great art to evade, escape from or force fortune, and by prudence to guide and incline things to my own bias. I have still less patience to undergo the troublesome and painful care therein required; and the most uneasy condition for me is to be suspended on urgent occasions, and to be agitated betwixt hope and fear. Deliberation, even in things of lightest moment, is very troublesome to me; and I find my mind more put to it to undergo the various tumblings and tossings of doubt and consultation, than to set up its rest and to acquiesce in whatever shall happen after the die is thrown. Few passions break my sleep, but of deliberations, the least will do it. As in roads, I preferably avoid those that are sloping and slippery, and put myself into the beaten track how dirty or deep soever, where I can fall no lower, and there seek my safety: so I love misfortunes that are purely so, that do not torment and tease me with the uncertainty

we are short of the foremost, but before the last. • HOR., EPIST., 2.2.201

That overplus, which the owner knows not of, but which benefits the thieves. • HOR., EPIST., 1.645

of their growing better; but that at the first push plunge me directly into the worst that can be expected.

dubia plus torquent mala.

In events I carry myself like a man; in conduct, like a child. The fear of the fall more fevers me than the fall itself. The game is not worth the candle. The covetous man fares worse with his passion than the poor, and the jealous man than the cuckold; and a man oftentimes loses more by defending his vineyard than if he gave it up. The lowest walk is the safest; 'tis the seat of constancy; you have there need of no one but yourself; 'tis there founded and wholly stands upon its own basis. Has not this example of a gentleman very well known, some air of philosophy in it? He married, being well advanced in years, having spent his youth in good fellowship, a great talker and a great jeerer, calling to mind how much the subject of cuckoldry had given him occasion to talk and scoff at others. To prevent them from paying him in his own coin, he married a wife from a place where any one finds what he wants for his money: "Good morrow, strumpet"; "Good morrow, cuckold"; and there was not anything wherewith he more commonly and openly entertained those who came to see him than with this design of his, by which he stopped the private chattering of mockers, and blunted all the point from this reproach.

As to ambition, which is neighbor, or rather daughter, to presumption, fortune, to advance me, must have come and taken me by the hand; for to trouble myself for an uncertain hope, and to have submitted myself to all the difficulties that accompany those who endeavor to bring themselves into credit in the beginning of their progress, I could never have done it:

spem pretio non emo.

I apply myself to what I see and to what I have in my hand, and go not very far from the shore,

Alter remus aquas, alter tibi radat arenas.

Besides, a man rarely arrives at these advancements but in first hazarding what he has of his own; and I am of opinion that if a man have sufficient to maintain him in the condition wherein he was born and brought up, 'tis a great folly to hazard that upon the uncertainty of augmenting it. He to whom fortune has denied whereon to set his foot, and to settle a quiet and composed way of living, is to be excused if he venture what he has, because, happen what will, necessity puts him upon shifting for himself.

Capienda rebus in malis præcepta via est.

And I rather excuse a younger brother for exposing what his friends have left him to the courtesy of fortune, than him with whom the honor of his family is entrusted, who cannot be necessitous but by his own fault. I have found a much shorter and more easy way, by the advice of the good friends I had in my younger days, to free myself from any such ambition, and to sit still,

Doubtful ills plague us worst. • SEN., AG., 3.1.29

I do not purchase hope at a price. • TER., AD., 2.3.11

One oar plunging into the sea, the other raking the sands. • PROP., 3.3.23

Desperate times call for desperate measures. • SEN., AG., 2.1.47

Cui sit conditio dulcis sine pulvere palmæ:

judging rightly enough of my own strength, that it was not capable of any great matters; and calling to mind the saying of the late Chancellor Olivier, that the French were like monkeys that swarm up a tree from branch to branch, and never stop till they come to the highest, and there shew their breech.

Turpe est, quod nequeas, capiti committere pondus,

I should find the best qualities I have useless in this age; the facility of my manners would have been called weakness and negligence; my faith and conscience, scrupulosity and superstition; my liberty and freedom would have been reputed troublesome, inconsiderate, and rash. Ill luck is good for something. It is good to be born in a very depraved age; for so, in comparison of others, you shall be reputed virtuous good cheap; he who in our days is but a parricide and a sacrilegious person is an honest man and a man of honor:

*Nunc, si depositum non inficiatur amicus,
Si reddat veterem cum tota ærugine follem,
Prodigiosa fides, et Tuscis digna libellis,
Quæque coronata lustrari debeat agna.*

and never was time or place wherein princes might propose to themselves more assured or greater rewards for virtue and justice. The first who shall make it his business to get himself into favor and esteem by those ways, I am much deceived if he do not and by the best title outstrip his competitors: force and violence can do something, but not always all.

We see merchants, country justices, and artisans go cheek by jowl with the best gentry in valor and military knowledge: they perform honorable actions, both in public engagements and private quarrels; they fight duels, they defend towns in our present wars; a prince stifles his special recommendation, renown, in this crowd; let him shine bright in humanity, truth, loyalty, temperance, and especially injustice; marks rare, unknown, and exiled; 'tis by no other means but by the sole goodwill of the people that he can do his business; and no other qualities can attract their goodwill like those, as being of the greatest utility to them. *Nil est tam popolare, quam bonitas.*

By this standard I had been great and rare, just as I find myself now pigmy and vulgar by the standard of some past ages, wherein, if no other better qualities concurred, it was ordinary and common to see a man moderate in his revenges, gentle in resenting injuries, religious of his word, neither double nor supple, nor accommodating his faith to the will of others, or the turns of the times: I would rather see all affairs go to wreck and ruin than falsify my faith to secure them. For as to this new virtue of feigning and dissimulation, which is now in so great credit, I mortally hate it; and of all vices find none that evidences so much baseness and meanness of spirit. 'Tis a cowardly and servile humor to hide and disguise a man's self under a visor, and not to dare to show himself what he is; 'tis by this our

What condition can compare with that where one has gained the palm without the dust of the course. • HOR., EPIST., 1.1.51

It is a shame to load the head so that it cannot bear the burthen, and the knees give way. • PROP., 3.9.5

Now, if a friend does not deny his trust, but restores the old purse with all its rust; 'tis a prodigious faith, worthy to be enrolled in among the Tuscan annals, and a crowned lamb should be sacrificed to such exemplary integrity. • JUV., 13.611

Nothing is so popular as an agreeable manner. • CIC., LIG., 12

servants are trained up to treachery; being brought up to speak what is not true, they make no conscience of a lie. A generous heart ought not to belie its own thoughts; it will make itself seen within; all there is good, or at least human. Aristotle reputes it the office of magnanimity openly and professedly to love and hate; to judge and speak with all freedom; and not to value the approbation or dislike of others in comparison of truth. Apollonius said it was for slaves to lie, and for freemen to speak truth. 'Tis the chief and fundamental part of virtue; we must love it for itself. He who speaks truth because he is obliged so to do, and because it serves him, and who is not afraid to lie when it signifies nothing to anybody, is not sufficiently true. My soul naturally abominates lying, and hates the very thought of it. I have an inward shame and a sharp remorse, if sometimes a lie escapes me: as sometimes it does, being surprised by occasions that allow me no premeditation. A man must not always tell all, for that were folly: but what a man says should be what he thinks, otherwise 'tis knavery. I do not know what advantage men pretend to by eternally counterfeiting and dissembling, if not never to be believed when they speak the truth; it may once or twice pass with men; but to profess the concealing their thought, and to brag, as some of our princes have done, that they would burn their shirts if they knew their true intentions, which was a saying of the ancient Metellius of Macedon; and that they who know not how to dissemble know not how to rule, is to give warning to all who have anything to do with them, that all they say is nothing but lying and deceit: *Quo quis versutior et callidior est, hoc invisior et suspectior, detracto opinione probitatis*: it were a great simplicity in any one to lay any stress either on the countenance or word of a man who has put on a resolution to be always another thing without than he is within, as Tiberius did; and I cannot conceive what part such persons can have in conversation with men, seeing they produce nothing that is received as true. Whoever is disloyal to truth is the same to falsehood also.

By how much any one is more subtle and cunning, by so much is he hated and suspected, the opinion of his integrity being withdrawn: • C1C., OFF., 2.9

Those of our time who have considered in the establishment of the duty of a prince the good of his affairs only, and have preferred that to the care of his faith and conscience, might have something to say to a prince whose affairs fortune had put into such a posture that he might for ever establish them by only once breaking his word: but it will not go so; they often buy in the same market; they make more than one peace and enter into more than one treaty in their lives. Gain tempts to the first breach of faith, and almost always presents itself, as in all other ill acts, sacrileges, murders, rebellions, treasons, as being undertaken for some kind of advantage; but this first gain has infinite mischievous consequences, throwing this prince out of all correspondence and negotiation, by this example of infidelity. Soliman, of the Ottoman race, a race not very solicitous of keeping their words or compacts, when, in my infancy, he made his army land at Otranto, being informed that Mercurino de' Gratinare and the inhabitants of Castro were detained prisoners, after having surrendered the place, contrary to the articles of their capitulation, sent orders to have them set at liberty, saying, that having other great enterprises in hand in those parts, the disloyalty, though it carried a show of present utility, would for the future bring on him a disrepute and distrust of infinite prejudice.

Now, for my part, I had rather be troublesome and indiscreet than a flatterer and a dissembler.

I confess that there may be some mixture of pride and obstinacy in keeping myself so upright and open as I do, without any consideration of others; and methinks I am a little too free, where I ought least to be so, and that I grow hot by the opposition of respect; and it may be also, that I suffer myself to follow the propension of my own nature for want of art; using the same liberty, speech, and countenance toward great persons, that I bring with me from my own house: I am sensible how much it declines toward incivility and indiscretion but, besides that I am so bred, I have not a wit supple enough to evade a sudden question, and to escape by some evasion, nor to feign a truth, nor memory enough to retain it so feigned; nor, truly, assurance enough to maintain it, and so play the brave out of weakness. And therefore it is that I abandon myself to candor, always to speak as I think, both by complexion and design, leaving the event to fortune.

Aristippus was wont to say, that the principal benefit he had extracted from philosophy was that he spoke freely and openly to all.

Memory is a faculty of wonderful use, and without which the judgment can very hardly perform its office: for my part I have none at all. What any one will propound to me, he must do it piecemeal, for to answer a speech consisting of several heads I am not able. I could not receive a commission by word of mouth without a note-book. And when I have a speech of consequence to make, if it be long, I am reduced to the miserable necessity of getting by heart word for word, what I am to say; I should otherwise have neither method nor assurance, being in fear that my memory would play me a slippery trick. But this way is no less difficult to me than the other; I must have three hours to learn three verses. And besides, in a work of a man's own, the liberty and authority of altering the order, of changing a word, incessantly varying the matter, makes it harder to stick in the memory of the author. The more I mistrust it the worse it is; it serves me best by chance; I must solicit it negligently; for if I press it, 'tis confused, and after it once begins to stagger, the more I sound it, the more it is perplexed; it serves me at its own hour, not at mine.

And the same defect I find in my memory, I find also in several other parts. I fly command, obligation, and constraint; that which I can otherwise naturally and easily do, if I impose it upon myself by an express and strict injunction, I cannot do it. Even the members of my body, which have a more particular jurisdiction of their own, sometimes refuse to obey me, if I enjoin them a necessary service at a certain hour. This tyrannical and compulsive appointment baffles them; they shrink up either through fear or spite, and fall into a trance. Being once in a place where it is looked upon as barbarous discourtesy not to pledge those who drink to you, though I had there all liberty allowed me, I tried to play the good fellow, out of respect to the ladies who were there, according to the custom of the country; but there was sport enough for this pressure and preparation, to force myself contrary to my custom and inclination, so stopped my throat that I could not swallow one drop, and was deprived of drinking so much

as with my meat; I found myself gorged, and my, thirst quenched by the quantity of drink that my imagination had swallowed. This effect is most manifest in such as have the most vehement and powerful imagination: but it is natural, notwithstanding, and there is no one who does not in some measure feel it. They offered an excellent archer, condemned to die, to save his life, if he would show some notable proof of his art, but he refused to try, fearing lest the too great contention of his will should make him shoot wide, and that instead of saving his life, he should also lose the reputation he had got of being a good marksman. A man who thinks of something else, will not fail to take over and over again the same number and measure of steps, even to an inch, in the place where he walks; but if he made it his business to measure and count them, he will find that what he did by nature and accident, he cannot so exactly do by design.

My library, which is a fine one among those of the village type, is situated in a corner of my house; if anything comes into my head that I have a mind to search or to write, lest I should forget it in but going across the court, I am fain to commit it to the memory of some other. If I venture in speaking to digress never so little from my subject, I am infallibly lost, which is the reason that I keep myself, in discourse, strictly close. I am forced to call the men who serve me either by the names of their offices or their country; for names are very hard for me to remember. I can tell indeed that there are three syllables, that it has a harsh sound, and that it begins or ends with such a letter; but that's all; and if I should live long, I do not doubt but I should forget my own name, as some others have done. Messalla Corvinus was two years without any trace of memory, which is also said of Georgius Trapezuntius. For my own interest, I often meditate what a kind of life theirs was, and if, without this faculty, I should have enough left to support me with any manner of ease; and prying narrowly into it, I fear that this privation, if absolute, destroys all the other functions of the soul. *Memoria certe non modo Philosophiam Sed omnis vitae usum, omnesque artes, una maxime continet.*

Plenus rimarum sum, hac atque iliac perfluo.

It has befallen me more than once to forget the watchword I had three hours before given or received, and to forget where I had hidden my purse; whatever Cicero is pleased to say, I help myself to lose what I have a particular care to lock safe up. Memory is the receptacle and case of science: and therefore mine being so treacherous, if I know little, I cannot much complain. I know, in general, the names of the arts, and of what they treat, but nothing more. I turn over books; I do not study them. What I retain I no longer recognize as another's; 'tis only what my judgment has made its advantage of, the discourses and imaginations in which it has been instructed: the author, place, words, and other circumstances, I immediately forget.

And I am so excellent at forgetting, that I no less forget my own writings and compositions than the rest. I am very often quoted to myself, and am not aware of it. Whoever should inquire of me where I had the verses and examples, that I have here huddled together, would puzzle me to tell him, and yet I have not borrowed them but from famous and known authors,

It is certain that memory contains not only philosophy, but all the arts and all that appertain to the use of life. • CIC., ACAD., 2.7

I'm full of chinks, and leak out every way. • TER., EUN., 2.2.23

not contenting myself that they were rich, if I, moreover, had them not from rich and honorable hands, where there is a concurrence of authority with reason. It is no great wonder if my book run the same fortune that other books do, if my memory lose what I have written as well as what I have read, and what I give, as well as what I receive.

Besides the defect of memory, I have others which very much contribute to my ignorance; I have a slow and heavy wit, the least cloud stops its progress, so that, for example, I never propose to it any never so easy a riddle that it could find out; there is not the least idle subtlety that will not gravel me; in games, where wit is required, as chess, draughts, and the like, I understand no more than the common movements. I have a slow and perplexed apprehension, but what it once apprehends, it apprehends well, for the time it retains it. My sight is perfect, entire, and discovers at a very great distance, but is soon weary and heavy at work, which occasions that I cannot read long, but am forced to have one to read to me. The younger Pliny can inform such as have not experimented it themselves, how important an impediment this is to those who devote themselves to this employment.

There is no so wretched and coarse a soul, wherein some particular faculty is not seen to shine; no soul so buried in sloth and ignorance, but it will sally at one end or another; and how it comes to pass that a man blind and asleep to everything else, shall be found sprightly, clear, and excellent in some one particular effect, we are to inquire of our masters: but the beautiful souls are they that are universal, open, and ready for all things; if not instructed, at least capable of being so; which I say to accuse my own; for whether it be through infirmity or negligence (and to neglect that which lies at our feet, which we have in our hands, and what nearest concerns the use of life, is far from my doctrine) there is not a soul in the world so awkward as mine, and so ignorant of many common things, and such as a man cannot without shame fail to know. I must give some examples.

I was born and bred up in the country, and among husbandmen; I have had business and husbandry in my own hands ever since my predecessors, who were lords of the estate I now enjoy, left me to succeed them; and yet I can neither cast accounts, nor reckon my counters: most of our current money I do not know, nor the difference betwixt one grain and another, either growing or in the barn, if it be not too apparent, and scarcely can distinguish between the cabbage and lettuce in my garden. I do not so much as understand the names of the chief instruments of husbandry, nor the most ordinary elements of agriculture, which the very children know: much less the mechanic arts, traffic, merchandise, the variety and nature of fruits, wines, and viands, nor how to make a hawk fly, nor to physic a horse or a dog. And, since I must publish my whole shame, 'tis not above a month ago, that I was trapped in my ignorance of the use of leaven to make bread, or to what end it was to keep wine in the vat. They conjectured of old at Athens, an aptitude for the mathematics in him they saw ingeniously bavin up a burthen of brushwood. In earnest, they would draw a quite contrary conclusion from me, for give me the whole provision and necessaries of a kitchen, I should starve.

By these features of my confession men may imagine others to my prejudice: but whatever I deliver myself to be, provided it be such as I really am, I have my end; neither will I make any excuse for committing to paper such mean and frivolous things as these: the meanness of the subject compels me to it. They may, if they please, accuse my project, but not my progress: so it is, that without anybody's needing to tell me, I sufficiently see of how little weight and value all this is, and the folly of my design: 'tis enough that my judgment does not contradict itself, of which these are the essays:

*Nasutus sis usque licet, sis denique nasus,
Quantum noluerit ferre rogatus Atlas;
Et possis ipsum to deridere Latinum,
Non potes in nugas dicere plura meas,
Ipse ego quam dixi: quid dentem dente juvabit
Rodere? carne opus est, si satur esse velis.
Ne perdas operam; qui se mirantur, in illos
Virus habe; nos hæc novimus esse nihil.*

I am not obliged not to utter absurdities, provided I am not deceived in them and know them to be such: and to trip knowingly, is so ordinary with me, that I seldom do it otherwise, and rarely trip by chance. 'Tis no great matter to add ridiculous actions to the temerity of my humor, since I cannot ordinarily help supplying it with those that are vicious.

I was present one day at Barleduc, when King Francis II, for a memorial of René, king of Sicily, was presented with a portrait he had drawn of himself: why is it not in like manner lawful for every one to draw himself with a pen, as he did with a crayon?

I will not, therefore, omit this blemish though very unfit to be published, which is irresolution; a very great effect and very incommodious in the negotiations of the affairs of the world; in doubtful enterprises, I know not which to choose:

Ne si, ne no, nel cor mi suona intero.

I can maintain an opinion, but I cannot choose one. By reason that in human things, to what sect soever we incline, many appearances present themselves that confirm us in it; and the philosopher Chrysippus said, that he would of Zeno and Cleanthes, his masters, learn their doctrines only; for, as to proofs and reasons, he should find enough of his own. Which way soever I turn, I still furnish myself with causes, and likelihood enough to fix me there; which makes me detain doubt and the liberty of choosing, till occasion presses; and then, to confess the truth, I, for the most part, throw the feather into the wind, as the saying is, and commit myself to the mercy of fortune; a very light inclination and circumstance carries me along with it.

Dum in dubio est animus, paulo momento huc atque illuc impellitur.

Let your nose be as keen as it will, be all nose, and even a nose so great that Atlas will refuse to bear it: if asked, Could you even excel Latinus in scoffing; against my trifles you could say no more than I myself have said: then to what end contend tooth against tooth? You must have flesh, if you want to be full; lose not your labor then; cast your venom upon those that admire themselves; I know already that these things are worthless. • MART., 13.2

My heart does not tell me either yes or no. • CANZONIERE, 135

While the mind is in doubt, in a short time it is impelled this way and that. • TER., AN., 1.6.32

The uncertainty of my judgment is so equally balanced in most occurrences, that I could willingly refer it to be decided by the chance of a die: and I observe, with great consideration of our human infirmity, the examples that the divine history itself has left us of this custom of referring to fortune and chance the determination of election in doubtful things: *Sors cecidit super Matthiam*. Human reason is a two-edged and dangerous sword: observe in the hands of Socrates, her most intimate and familiar friend, how many several points it has. I am thus good for nothing but to follow and suffer myself to be easily carried away with the crowd; I have not confidence enough in my own strength to take upon me to command and lead; I am very glad to find the way beaten before me by others. If I must run the hazard of an uncertain choice, I am rather willing to have it under such a one as is more confident in his opinions than I am in mine, whose ground and foundation I find to be very slippery and unsure.

The lot fell upon Matthew. • ACTS, 1.26

Yet I do not easily change, by reason that I discern the same weakness in contrary opinions: *Ipsa consuetudo assentiendi periculosa esse videtur, et lubrica*. especially in political affairs, there is a large field open for changes and contestation:

The very custom of assenting seems to be dangerous and slippery. • CIC., ACAD., 2.21

*Iusta pari premitur veluti cum pondere libra,
Prona, nec hac plus pane sedet, nec surgit ab illa.*

As a just balance, pressed with equal weight, neither dips nor rises on either side. • TIB., 4.41

Machiavelli's writings, for example, were solid enough for the subject, yet were they easy enough to be controverted; and they who have done so, have left as great a facility of controverting theirs; there was never wanting in that kind of argument replies and replies upon replies, and as infinite a contexture of debates as our wrangling lawyers have extended in favor of long suits,

Cædimur et totidem plagis consumimus hostem,

We are slain, and with as many blows kill the enemy. • HOR., EPIST., 2.2.97

the reasons have little other foundation than experience, and the variety of human events presenting us with infinite examples of all sorts of forms. An understanding person of our times says: That whoever would, in contradiction to our almanacs, write cold where they say hot, and wet where they say dry, and always put the contrary to what they foretell; if he were to lay a wager, he would not care which side he took, excepting where no uncertainty could fall out, as to promise excessive heats at Christmas, or extremity of cold at Midsummer. I have the same opinion of these political controversies; be on which side you will, you have as fair a game to play as your adversary, provided you do not proceed so far as to shock principles that are broad and manifest. And yet, in my conceit, in public affairs, there is no government so ill, provided it be ancient and has been constant, that is not better than change and alteration. Our manners are infinitely corrupt, and wonderfully incline to the worse; of our laws and customs there are many that are barbarous and monstrous nevertheless, by reason of the difficulty of reformation, and the danger of stirring things, if I could put something under to stop the wheel, and keep it where it is, I would do it with all my heart:

*numquam adeo foedis, adeoque pudendis
Utimur exemplis, ut non peiora supersint.*

The examples we use are not so shameful and foul but that worse remain behind. • JUV., 8.183

The worst thing I find in our state is instability, and that our laws, no more than our clothes, cannot settle in any certain form. It is very easy to accuse a government of imperfection, for all mortal things are full of it: it is very easy to beget in a people a contempt of ancient observances; never any man undertook it but he did it; but to establish a better regimen in the stead of that which a man has overthrown, many who have attempted it have foundered. I very little consult my prudence in my conduct; I am willing to let it be guided by the public rule. Happy the people who do what they are commanded, better than they who command, without tormenting themselves as to the causes; who suffer themselves gently to roll after the celestial revolution! Obedience is never pure nor calm in him who reasons and disputes.

In fine, to return to myself: the only thing by which I something esteem myself, is that wherein never any man thought himself to be defective; my recommendation is vulgar, common, and popular; for who ever thought he wanted sense? It would be a proposition that would imply a contradiction in itself; 'tis a disease that never is where it is discerned; 'tis tenacious and strong, but what the first ray of the patient's sight nevertheless pierces through and disperses, as the beams of the sun do thick and obscure mists; to accuse one's self would be to excuse in this case, and to condemn, to absolve. There never was porter or the silliest girl, that did not think they had sense enough to do their business. We easily enough confess in others an advantage of courage, strength, experience, activity, and beauty, but an advantage in judgment we yield to none; and the reasons that proceed simply from the natural conclusions of others, we think, if we had but turned our thoughts that way, we should ourselves have found out as well as they. Knowledge, style, and such parts as we see in others' works, we are soon aware of, if they excel our own: but for the simple products of the understanding, every one thinks he could have found out the like in himself, and is hardly sensible of the weight and difficulty, if not (and then with much ado) in an extreme and incomparable distance. And whoever should be able clearly to discern the height of another's judgment, would be also able to raise his own to the same pitch. So that it is a sort of exercise, from which a man is to expect very little praise; a kind of composition of small repute.

And, besides, for whom do you write? The learned, to whom the authority appertains of judging books, know no other value but that of learning, and allow of no other proceeding of wit but that of erudition and art: if you have mistaken one of the Scipios for another, what is all the rest you have to say worth? Whoever is ignorant of Aristotle, according to their rule, is in some sort ignorant of himself; vulgar souls cannot discern the grace and force of a lofty and delicate style. Now these two sorts of men take up the world. The third sort into whose hands you fall, of souls that are regular and strong of themselves, is so rare, that it justly has neither name nor place among us; and 'tis so much time lost to aspire unto it, or to endeavor to please it.

'Tis commonly said that the justest portion Nature has given us of her favors is that of sense; for there is no one who is not contented with his share: is it not reason? whoever should see beyond that, would see beyond his sight. I think my opinions are good and sound, but who does not think the same of his own? One of the best proofs I have that mine are so is the small esteem I have of myself; for had they not been very well assured, they would easily have suffered themselves to have been deceived by the peculiar affection I have to myself, as one that places it almost wholly in myself, and do not let much run out. All that others distribute among an infinite number of friends and acquaintance, to their glory and grandeur, I dedicate to the repose of my own mind and to myself; that which escapes thence is not properly by my direction,

mihi nempe valere et vivere doctus.

To live and to do well for myself. •
LUCR., 5.959

Now I find my opinions very bold and constant in condemning my own imperfection. And, to say the truth, 'tis a subject upon which I exercise my judgment as much as upon any other. The world looks always opposite; I turn my sight inward, and there fix and employ it. I have no other business but myself, I am eternally meditating upon myself, considering and tasting myself. Other men's thoughts are ever wandering abroad, if they will but see it; they are still going forward,

nemo in sese tentat descendere,

No one thinks of descending into himself. • PERS., 4.23

for my part, I circulate in myself.

This capacity of trying the truth, whatever it be, in myself, and this free humor of not over easily subjecting my belief, I owe principally to myself; for the strongest and most general imaginations I have are those that, as a man may say, were born with me; they are natural and entirely my own. I produced them crude and simple, with a strong and bold production, but a little troubled and imperfect; I have since established and fortified them with the authority of others and the sound examples of the ancients, whom I have found of the same judgment: they have given me faster hold, and a more manifest fruition and possession of that I had before embraced.

The reputation that every one pretends to of vivacity and promptness of wit, I seek in regularity; the glory they pretend to from a striking and signal action, or some particular excellence, I claim from order, correspondence, and tranquillity of opinions and manners. *Omnino si quidquam est decorum, nihil est profecto magis, quam aequabilitas universae vitae, tum singularum actionum, quam conservare non possis, si, aliorum naturam imitans, omittas tuam.*

If anything be entirely decorous, nothing certainly can be more so than an equability alike in the whole life and in every particular action; which thou canst not possibly observe if, imitating other men's natures, thou layest aside thy own. •
CIC., OFF., 1.31

Here, then, you see to what degree I find myself guilty of this first part, that I said was the vice of presumption. As to the second, which consists in not having a sufficient esteem for others, I know not whether or no I can so well excuse myself; but whatever comes on it I am resolved to speak the truth.

And whether, peradventure, it be that the continual frequentation I have had with the humors of the ancients, and the idea of those great souls of

past ages, put me out of taste both with others and myself, or that, in truth, the age we live in produces but very indifferent things, yet so it is that I see nothing worthy of any great admiration. Neither, indeed, have I so great an intimacy with many men as is requisite to make a right judgment of them; and those with whom my condition makes me the most frequent, are, for the most part, men who have little care of the culture of the soul, but that look upon honor as the sum of all blessings, and valor as the height of all perfection. What I see that is fine in others I very readily commend and esteem: nay, I often say more in their commendation than I think they really deserve, and give myself so far leave to lie, for I cannot invent a false subject: my testimony is never wanting to my friends in what I conceive deserves praise, and where a foot is due I am willing to give them a foot and a half; but to attribute to them qualities that they have not, I cannot do it, nor openly defend their imperfections.

Nay, I frankly give my very enemies their due testimony of honor; my affection alters, my judgment does not, and I never confound my animosity with other circumstances that are foreign to it; and I am so jealous of the liberty of my judgment that I can very hardly part with it for any passion whatever. I do myself a greater injury in lying than I do him of whom I tell a lie. This commendable and generous custom is observed of the Persian nation, that they spoke of their mortal enemies and with whom they were at deadly war, as honorably and justly as their virtues deserved.

I know men enough that have several fine parts; one wit, another courage, another address, another conscience, another language: one science, another, another; but a generally great man, and who has all these brave parts together, or any one of them to such a degree of excellence that we should admire him or compare him with those we honor of times past, my fortune never brought me acquainted with; and the greatest I ever knew, I mean for the natural parts of the soul, was Étienne de La Boétie; his was a full soul indeed, and that had every way a beautiful aspect: a soul of the old stamp, and that had produced great effects had his fortune been so pleased, having added much to those great natural parts by learning and study. But how it comes to pass I know not, and yet it is certainly so, there is as much vanity and weakness of judgment in those who profess the greatest abilities, who take upon them learned callings and bookish employments as in any other sort of men whatever; either because more is required and expected from them, and that common defects are excusable in them, or because the opinion they have of their own learning makes them more bold to expose and lay themselves too open, by which they lose and betray themselves. As an artificer more manifests his want of skill in a rich matter he has in hand, if he disgrace the work by ill handling and contrary to the rules required, than in a matter of less value; and men are more displeased at a disproportion in a statue of gold than in one of plaster; so do these when they advance things that in themselves and in their place would be good; for they make use of them without discretion, honoring their memories at the expense of their understandings, and making themselves ridiculous by honoring Cicero, Galen, Ulpian, and St. Jerome alike.

I willingly fall again into the discourse of the vanity of our education, the end of which is not to render us good and wise, but learned, and she has obtained it. She has not taught us to follow and embrace virtue and prudence, but she has imprinted in us their derivation and etymology; we know how to decline Virtue, if we know not how to love it; if we do not know what prudence is really and in effect, and by experience, we have it however by jargon and heart: we are not content to know the extraction, kindred, and alliances of our neighbors; we desire, moreover, to have them our friends and to establish a correspondence and intelligence with them; but this education of ours has taught us definitions, divisions, and partitions of virtue, as so many surnames and branches of a genealogy, without any further care of establishing any familiarity or intimacy betwixt her and us. It has culled out for our initiatory instruction not such books as contain the soundest and truest opinions, but those that speak the best Greek and Latin, and by their fine words has instilled into our fancy the vainest humors of antiquity. A good education alters the judgment and manners; as it happened to Polemon, a lewd and debauched young Greek, who going by chance to hear one of Xenocrates' lectures, did not only observe the eloquence and learning of the reader, and not only brought away, the knowledge of some fine matter, but a more manifest and more solid profit, which was the sudden change and reformation of his former life. Whoever found such an effect of our discipline?

*faciasne, quod olim
Mutatus Polemon? ponas insignia morbi
Fasciolas, cubital, focalia; potus ut ille
Dicitur ex collo furtim carpsisse coronas,
Postquam est impransi correptus voce magistri?*

That seems to me to be the least contemptible condition of men, which by its plainness and simplicity is seated in the lowest degree, and invites us to a more regular course. I find the rude manners and language of country people commonly better suited to the rule and prescription of true philosophy, than those of our philosophers themselves. *Plus sapit vulgus, quia tantum, quantum opus est, sapit.*

The most remarkable men, as I have judged by outward appearance (for to judge of them according to my own method, I must penetrate a great deal deeper), for soldiers and military conduct, were the Duc de Guise, who died at Orleans, and the late Marshal Strozzi; and for men of great ability and no common virtue, Olivier and de L'Hospital, Chancellors of France. Poetry, too, in my opinion, has flourished in this age of ours; we have abundance of very good artificers in the trade: D'Aurat, Beza, Buchanan, L'Hospital, Montdore, Turnebus; as to the French poets, I believe they raised their art to the highest pitch to which it can ever arrive; and in those parts of it wherein Ronsard and Du Bellay excel, I find them little inferior to the ancient perfection. Adrian Turnebusknew more, and what he did know, better than any man of his time, or long before him.

The lives of the last Duke of Alva, and of our Constable de Montmorency, were both of them great and noble, and that had many rare resemblances of fortune; but the beauty and glory of the death of the last, in the sight of

Will you do what reformed Polemon did of old? will you lay aside the joys of your disease, your garters, capuchin, muffler, as he in his cups is said to have secretly torn off his garlands from his neck when he heard what that temperate teacher said? • HOR., SAT., 2.3.253

The vulgar are so much the wiser, because they only know what is needful for them to know. • LACTANT., DIV. INST., 3.5

Paris and of his king, in their service, against his nearest relations, at the head of an army through his conduct victorious, and by a sudden stroke, in so extreme old age, merits methinks to be recorded among the most remarkable events of our times.

As also the constant goodness, sweetness of manners, and conscientious facility of Monsieur de la Nouë, in so great an injustice of armed parties (the true school of treason, inhumanity, and robbery), wherein he always kept up the reputation of a great and experienced captain.

I have taken a delight to publish in several places the hopes I have of Marie de Gournay le Jars, my adopted daughter; and certainly beloved by me more than paternally, and enveloped in my retirement and solitude as one of the best parts of my own being: I have no longer regard to anything in this world but her. And if a man may presage from her youth, her soul will one day be capable of very great things; and among others, of the perfection of that sacred friendship, to which we do not read that any of her sex could ever yet arrive; the sincerity and solidity of her manners are already sufficient for it, and her affection toward me more than superabundant, and such, in short, as that there is nothing more to be wished, if not that the apprehension she has of my end, being now five-and-fifty years old, might not so much afflict her. The judgment she made of my first *Essays*, being a woman, so young, and in this age, and alone in her own country; and the famous vehemence wherewith she loved me, and desired my acquaintance solely from the esteem she had thence of me, before she ever saw my face, is an incident very worthy of consideration.

Other virtues have had little or no credit in this age; but valor is become popular by our civil wars; and in this, we have souls brave even to perfection, and in so great number that the choice is impossible to make.

This is all of extraordinary and uncommon grandeur that has hitherto arrived at my knowledge.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Canzoniere	Petrarch, <i>Il Canzoniere</i>
Cic., Acad.	Cicero, <i>Academica</i>
Cic., Lig.	Cicero, <i>Pro Ligario</i>
Cic., Off.	Cicero, <i>On Duties</i>
Hor., Ars P.	Horace, <i>Art of Poetry</i>
Hor., Epist.	Horace, <i>Epistles</i>

Hor., Sat.	Horace, <i>Satires</i>
Juv.	Juvenal, <i>Satires</i>
Lactant., Div. Inst.	Lactantius, <i>Divinae institutiones</i>
Lucr.	Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i>
Mart.	Martial, <i>Epigrams</i>
Acts	<i>Acts of the Apostles</i>
Psalms	<i>Book of Psalms</i>
Ov., Pont.	Ovid, <i>Ex Ponto</i>
Pers.	Persius, <i>Satires</i>
Prop.	Propertius, <i>Elegies</i>
Sen., Ag.	Seneca, <i>Agamemnon</i>
Tac., Agr.	Tacitus, <i>Agricola</i>
Ter., Ad.	Terence, <i>Adelphi</i>
Ter., An.	Terence, <i>Andria</i>
Ter., Eun.	Terence, <i>Eunuchus</i>
Tib.	Tibullus, <i>Elegiae</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>