Michel de Montaigne

Essays

Book 1 · Chapter 38

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On Solitude

Let us leave aside that long comparison between the active and the solitary life; and as for the fine saying with which ambition and avarice palliate their vices, that we are not born for ourselves but for the public, let us boldly appeal to those who are in public affairs; let them lay their hands upon their hearts, and then say whether, on the contrary, they do not rather aspire to titles and offices and that tumult of the world to make their private advantage at the public expense. The corrupt ways by which in this our time they arrive at the height to which their ambitions aspire, manifestly enough declares that their ends cannot be very good. Let us tell ambition, that it is she herself who gives us a taste of solitude; for what does she so much avoid as society? What does she so much seek as elbow-room? A man many do well or ill everywhere: but if what Bias says be true, that the greatest part is the worse part, or what the Preacher says: there is not one good of a thousand;

Rari quippe boni: numero uix sunt totidem quot
Thebarum portæ, uel diuitis ostia Nili,

Good men are scarce: we could hardly reckon up as many as there are gates to Thebes, or mouths to the Nile. • Juv., 13.26

the contagion is very dangerous in the crowd. A man must either imitate the vicious or hate them: both are dangerous things, either to resemble them because they are many or to hate many because they are unresembling to ourselves.

Merchants who go to sea are in the right, when they are cautious that those who embark with them in the same bottom, be neither dissolute blasphemers nor vicious other ways, looking upon such society as unfortunate.

And therefore it was that Bias pleasantly said to some, who being with him in a dangerous storm implored the assistance of the gods: “Peace, speak softly,” said he, “that they may not know you are here in my company.”

And of more pressing example, Albuquerque, viceroy in the Indies for Manuel, King of Portugal, in an extreme peril of shipwreck, took a young

boy upon his shoulders, for this only end that, in the society of their common danger, his innocence might serve to protect him, and to recommend him to the divine favor, that they might get safe to shore.

'Tis not that a wise man may not live everywhere content, and be alone in the very crowd of a palace: but if it be left to his own choice, the schoolman will tell you that he should fly the very sight of the crowd: he will endure it, if need be; but, if it be referred to him, he will choose to be alone. He cannot think himself sufficiently rid of vice, if he must yet contend with it in other men.

Charondas punished those as evil men who were convicted of keeping ill company.

There is nothing so unsociable and sociable as man, the one by his vice, the other by his nature.

And Antisthenes, in my opinion, did not give him a satisfactory answer, who reproached him with frequenting ill company, by saying that the physicians lived well enough among the sick: for if they contribute to the health of the sick, no doubt but by the contagion, continual sight of, and familiarity with diseases, they must of necessity impair their own.

Now the end, I take it, is all one, to live at more leisure and at one's ease: but men do not always take the right way. They often think they have totally taken leave of all business, when they have only exchanged one employment for another: there is little less trouble in governing a private family than a whole kingdom. Wherever the mind is perplexed, it is in an entire disorder, and domestic employments are not less troublesome for being less important. Moreover, for having shaken off the court and the exchange, we have not taken leave of the principal vexations of life:

Ratio et prudentia curas,
Non locus effusi late maris arbiter, aufert;

Reason and prudence, not a place with a commanding view of the great ocean, banish care. • Hor., Epist., 1.2

ambition, avarice, irresolution, fear, and inordinate desires, do not leave us because we forsake our native country:

Et
Post equitem sedet atra cura;

Black care sits behind the horseman. • Hor., Carm., 3.1.40

they often follow us even to cloisters and philosophical schools; nor deserts, nor caves, hair-shirts, nor fasts, can disengage us from them:

Hæret lateri lethalis arundo.

The fatal shaft sticks in the wounded side. • Verg., Aen., 4.73

One telling Socrates, that such a one was nothing improved by his travels: "I very well believe it," said he, "for he took himself along with him."

Quid terras alio calentes
Sole mutamus? patriæ quis exsul
Se quoque fugit?

Why do we seek climates warmed by another sun? Who is the man that by fleeing from his country, can also flee

If a man do not first discharge both himself and his mind of the burden with which he finds himself oppressed, motion will but make it press the harder and sit the heavier, as the lading of a ship is of less encumbrance when fast and bestowed in a settled posture. You do a sick man more harm than good in removing him from place to place; you fix and establish the disease by motion, as stakes sink deeper and more firmly into the earth by being moved up and down in the place where they are designed to stand. Therefore, it is not enough to get remote from the public; 'tis not enough to shift the soil only; a man must flee from the popular conditions that have taken possession of his soul, he must sequester and come again to himself.

from himself? • Hor., Carm., 2.16.18

Rupi jam uincula, dicas:
Nam luctata canis nodum arripit; attamen illi,
Quum fugit, a collo trahitur pars longa catenæ.

You say, perhaps, you have broken your chain: the dog who after long efforts has broken his chain, still in his flight drags a heavy portion of it after him. • Pers., 5.158

We still carry our fetters along with us. 'Tis not an absolute liberty; we yet cast back a look upon what we have left behind us; the fancy is still full of it:

Nisi purgatum est pectus, quæ prælia nobis
Atque pericula tunc ingratis insinuandum?
Quantæ connscindunt hominem cupedinis acres
Sollicitum curæ? quantique perinde timores?
Quidue superbia, spurcitia, ac petulantia, quantas
Efficiunt clades? quid luxus, desidiesque?

But unless the mind is purified, what internal combats and dangers must we incur in spite of all our efforts! How many bitter anxieties, how many terrors, follow upon unregulated passion! What destruction befalls us from pride, lust, petulant anger! What evils arise from luxury and sloth! • Lucr., 5.43

Our disease lies in the mind, which cannot escape from itself;

In culpa est animus, qui se non effugit unquam,

Wrong is the mind that never escapes from itself. • Hor., Epist., 1.14.13

and therefore is to be called home and confined within itself: that is the true solitude, and that may be enjoyed even in populous cities and the courts of kings, though more commodiously apart.

Now, since we will attempt to live alone, and to waive all manner of conversation among them, let us so order it that our content may depend wholly upon ourselves; let us dissolve all obligations that ally us to others; let us obtain this from ourselves, that we may live alone in good earnest, and live at our ease too.

Stilpo having escaped from the fire that consumed the city where he lived, and wherein he had lost his wife, children, goods, and all that ever he was master of, Demetrius Poliorcetes seeing him, in so great a ruin of his country, appear with a serene and undisturbed countenance, asked him if he had received no loss? To which he made answer, No; and that, thanks be to God, nothing was lost of his. This also was the meaning of the philosopher Antisthenes, when he pleasantly said, that "men should furnish themselves with such things as would float, and might with the owner escape the storm."

And certainly a wise man never loses anything if he has himself. When the city of Nola was ruined by the barbarians, Paulinus, who was bishop of that place, having there lost all he had, himself a prisoner, prayed after this

manner: "O Lord, defend me from being sensible of this loss; for Thou knowest they have yet touched nothing of that which is mine." The riches that made him rich and the goods that made him good, were still kept entire. This it is to make choice of treasures that can secure themselves from plunder and violence, and to hide them in such a place into which no one can enter and that is not to be betrayed by any but ourselves. Wives, children, and goods must be had, and especially health, by him that can get it; but we are not so to set our hearts upon them that our happiness must have its dependence upon them; we must reserve a backshop, wholly our own and entirely free, wherein to settle our true liberty, our principal solitude and retreat. And in this we must for the most part entertain ourselves with ourselves, and so privately that no exotic knowledge or communication be admitted there; there to laugh and to talk, as if without wife, children, goods, train, or attendance, to the end that when it shall so fall out that we must lose any or all of these, it may be no new thing to be without them. We have a mind pliable in itself, that will be company; that has wherewithal to attack and to defend, to receive and to give: let us not then fear in this solitude to languish under an uncomfortable vacuity.

In solis sis tibi turba locis.

In solitude, be company for thyself. • Tib., 6.13.12

Virtue is satisfied with herself, without discipline, without words, without effects.

In our ordinary actions there is not one of a thousand that concerns ourselves. He that thou seest scrambling up the ruins of that wall, furious and transported, against whom so many harquebus-shots are levelled; and that other all over scars, pale, and fainting with hunger, and yet resolved rather to die than to open the gates to him; dost thou think that these men are there upon their own account? No; peradventure in the behalf of one whom they never saw and who never concerns himself for their pains and danger, but lies wallowing the while in sloth and pleasure: this other slavering, blear-eyed, slovenly fellow, that thou seest come out of his study after midnight, dost thou think he has been tumbling over books, to learn how to become a better man, wiser, and more content? No such matter; he will there end his days, but he will teach posterity the measure of Plautus's verses and the true orthography of a Latin word. Who is it that does not voluntarily exchange his health, his repose, and his very life for reputation and glory, the most useless, frivolous, and false coin that passes current among us? Our own death does not sufficiently terrify and trouble us; let us, moreover, charge ourselves with those of our wives, children, and family: our own affairs do not afford us anxiety enough; let us undertake those of our neighbors and friends, still more to break our brains and torment us.

Uah! quemquamne hominem in animum instituere, aut
Parare, quod sit carius, quam ipse est sibi?

Ah! can any man discover or devise anything dearer than he is to himself? • Ter., Ad., 1.1.13

Solitude seems to me to wear the best favor, in such as have already employed their most active and flourishing age in the world's service; after the example of Thales.

We have lived enough for others; let us at least live out the small remnant of life for ourselves; let us now call in our thoughts and intentions to ourselves, and to our own ease and repose. 'Tis no light thing to make a sure retreat; it will be enough for us to do without mixing other enterprises. Since God gives us leisure to order our removal, let us make ready, truss our baggage, take leave betimes of the company, and disentangle ourselves from those violent importunities that engage us elsewhere and separate us from ourselves.

We must break the knot of our obligations, how strong soever, and hereafter love this or that, but espouse nothing, but ourselves: that is to say, let the remainder be our own, but not so joined and so close as not to be forced away without flaying us or tearing out part of our whole. The greatest thing in the world is for a man to know that he is his own. 'Tis time to wean ourselves from society, when we can no longer add anything to it; he who is not in a condition to lend must forbid himself to borrow. Our forces begin to fail us: let us call them in and concentrate them in and for ourselves. He that can cast off within himself and resolve the offices of friendship and company, let him do it. In this decay of nature which renders him useless, burdensome and importunate to others, let him take care not to be useless, burdensome, and importunate to himself. Let him soothe and caress himself, and above all things be sure to govern himself with reverence to his reason and conscience to that degree as to be ashamed to make a false step in their presence: *Rarum est enim, ut satis se quisque uereatur.*

For 'tis rarely seen that men have respect and reverence enough for themselves. • Quint., Inst., 10.7

Socratessays, that boys are to cause themselves to be instructed, men to exercise themselves in well-doing, and old men to retire from all civil and military employments, living at their own discretion, without the obligation to any office.

There are some complexions more proper for these precepts of retirement than others. Such as are of a soft and dull apprehension, and of a tender will and affection not readily to be subdued or employed, whereof I am one, both by natural condition and by reflection, will sooner incline to this advice, than active and busy souls, which embrace all, engage in all, are hot upon everything, which offer, present, and give themselves up to every occasion. We are to use these accidental and extraneous commodities, so far as they are pleasant to us, but by no means to lay our principal foundation there; 'tis no true one; neither nature nor reason allows it so to be. Why therefore should we, contrary to their laws, enslave our own contentment to the power of another? To anticipate also the accidents of fortune, to deprive ourselves of the conveniences we have in our own power, as several have done upon the account of devotion, and some philosophers by reasoning; to be one's own servant, to lie hard, to put out our own eyes, to throw our wealth into the river, to seek out grief; these, by the misery of this life, aiming at bliss in another; those, by laying themselves low to avoid the danger of falling: all such are acts of an excessive virtue. The stoutest and most resolute natures render even their hiding away glorious and exemplary:

Tuta et paruula laudo,
Quum res dificiunt, satis inter uilia fortis:
Uerum, ubi quid melius contingit et unctius, idem
Hos sapere, et solos aio bene uiuere, quorum
Conspicitur nitidis fundata pecunia uillis.

When I run short, I laud a humble and safe condition, content with little: but when things turn round, then I change my note, and say that none are wise and know how to live, but those who have plenty of money to lay out in shining villas. • Hor., Epist., 1.15.42

A great deal less would serve my turn well enough. 'Tis enough for me, under fortune's favor, to prepare myself for her disgrace, and, being at my ease, to represent to myself, as far as my imagination can stretch, the ill to come; as we do at jousts and tiltings, where we counterfeit war in the greatest calm of peace.

I do not think Arcesilaus the philosopher the less temperate and virtuous, for knowing that he made use of gold and silver vessels, when the condition of his fortune allowed him so to do; I have indeed a better opinion of him, than if he had denied himself what he used with liberality and moderation.

I see the utmost limits of natural necessity: and considering a poor man begging at my door, ofttimes more jocund and more healthy than I myself am, I put myself into his place, and attempt to dress my mind after his mode; and running, in like manner, over other examples, though I fancy death, poverty, contempt, and sickness treading on my heels, I easily resolve not to be affrighted, forasmuch as a less than I takes them with so much patience; and am not willing to believe that a less understanding can do more than a greater, or that the effects of precept cannot arrive to as great a height as those of custom. And knowing of how uncertain duration these accidental conveniences are, I never forget, in the height of all my enjoyments, to make it my chiefest prayer to Almighty God, that He will please to render me content with myself and the condition wherein I am. I see young men very gay and frolic, who nevertheless keep a mass of pills in their trunk at home, to take when they've got a cold, which they fear so much the less, because they think they have remedy at hand. Every one should do in like manner, and, moreover, if they find themselves subject to some more violent disease, should furnish themselves with such medicines as may numb and stupefy the part.

The employment a man should choose for such a life, ought neither to be a laborious nor an unpleasing one; otherwise 'tis to no purpose at all to be retired. And this depends upon every one's liking and humor. Mine has no manner of complacency for husbandry, and such as love it ought to apply themselves to it with moderation.

Conentur sibi res, non se submittere rebus.

Endeavor to make circumstances subject to me, and not me subject to circumstances. • Hor., Epist., 1.1.19

Husbandry is otherwise a very servile employment, as Sallust calls it; though some parts of it are more excusable than the rest, as the care of gardens, which Xenophon attributes to Cyrus; and a mean may be found out between the sordid and low application, so full of perpetual solicitude, which is seen in men who make it their entire business and study, and the stupid and extreme negligence, letting all things go at random which we see in others:

Democriti pecus edit agellos
Cultaque, dum peregre est animus sine corpore uelox.

Democritus's cattle eat his corn and spoil his fields, whilst his mind ranges abroad without the body. • Hor., Epist., 1.12.12

But let us hear what advice the younger Pliny gives his friend Caninius Rufus upon the subject of solitude: "I advise thee, in the full and plentiful retirement wherein thou art, to leave to thy hinds the care of thy husbandry, and to addict thyself to the study of letters, to extract from thence something that may be entirely and absolutely thine own." By which he means reputation; like Cicero, who says, that he would employ his solitude and retirement from public affairs, to acquire by his writings an immortal life.

Usque adeone
Scire tuum nihil est, nisi to scire hoc, sciat alter?

Is all that thy learning nothing, unless another knows that thou knowest? • Pers., 1.23

It appears to be reason, when a man talks of retiring from the world, that he should look quite out of himself. These do it but by halves: they design well enough for themselves when they shall be no more in it; but still they pretend to extract the fruits of that design from the world, when absent from it, by a ridiculous contradiction. The imagination of those who seek solitude upon the account of devotion, filling their hopes and courage with certainty of divine promises in the other life, is much more rationally founded. They propose to themselves God, an infinite object in goodness and power; the soul has there wherewithal, at full liberty, to satiate her desires: afflictions and sufferings turn to their advantage, being undergone for the acquisition of eternal health and joy; death is to be wished and longed for, where it is the passage to so perfect a condition; the asperity of the rules they impose upon themselves is immediately softened by custom, and all their carnal appetites baffled and subdued, by refusing to humor and feed them, these being only supported by use and exercise. This sole end therefore of another happy and immortal life is that, which really merits that we should abandon the pleasures and conveniences of this; and he who can really and constantly inflame his soul with the ardor of this vivid faith and hope, erects for himself in solitude a more voluptuous and delicious life than any other sort of living whatever.

Neither the end, then, nor the means of this advice pleases me, for we often fall out of the frying-pan into the fire. This book employment is as painful as any other, and as great an enemy to health, which ought to be the first thing considered; neither ought a man to be allured with the pleasure of it, which is the same that destroys the frugal, the avaricious, the voluptuous, and the ambitious man. The sages give us caution enough to beware the treachery of our desires, and to distinguish true and entire pleasures from such as are mixed and complicated with greater pain. For the most of our pleasures, say they, wheedle and caress only to strangle us, like those thieves the Egyptians called Philistae; if the headache should come before drunkenness, we should have a care of drinking too much: but pleasure, to deceive us, marches before and conceals her train. Books are pleasant, but if, by being over-studious, we impair our health and spoil our good-humor, the best pieces we have, let us give it over; I, for my part, am one of those who think, that no fruit derived from them can recompense so great a loss. As men who have long felt themselves

weakened by indisposition, give themselves up at last to the mercy of medicine and submit to certain rules of living, which they are for the future never to transgress; so he who retires, weary of and disgusted with the common way of living, ought to model this new one he enters into by the rules of reason, and to institute and establish it by premeditation and reflection. He ought to have taken leave of all sorts of labor, what advantage soever it may promise, and generally to have shaken off all those passions which disturb the tranquillity of body and soul, and then choose the way that best suits with his own humor:

Unusquisque sua nouerit ire uia.

Let each one figure out their path. • Prop., 2.25.38

In husbandry, study, hunting, and all other exercises, men are to proceed to the utmost limits of pleasure, but must take heed of engaging further, where trouble begins to mix with it. We are to reserve so much employment only as is necessary to keep us in breath and to defend us from the inconveniences that the other extreme of a dull and stupid laziness brings along with it. There are sterile knotty sciences, chiefly hammered out for the crowd; let such be left to them who are engaged in the world's service. I for my part care for no other books, but either such as are pleasant and easy, to amuse me, or those that comfort and instruct me how to regulate my life and death:

Tacitum syluas inter reptare salubres,
Curantem, quidquid dignum sapienti bonoque est.

Silently meditating in the healthy groves, what best becomes a wise and honest man. • Hor., Epist., 1.4.4

Wiser men, having great force and vigor of soul, may propose to themselves a rest wholly spiritual: but for me, who have a very ordinary soul, it is very necessary to support myself with bodily conveniences; and age having of late deprived me of those pleasures that were more acceptable to me, I instruct and whet my appetite to those that remain, more suitable to this other reason. We ought to hold with all our force, both of hands and teeth, the use of the pleasures of life that our years, one after another, snatch away from us.

Carpamus dulcia; nostrum est,
Quod uiuis; cinis, et manes, et fabula fies.

Let us pluck life's sweets, 'tis for them we live: by and by we shall be ashes, a ghost, a mere subject of talk. • Pers., 5.151

Now, as to the end that Pliny and Cicero propose to us, of glory; 'tis infinitely wide of my account. Ambition is of all others the most contrary humor to solitude; glory and repose are things that cannot possibly inhabit in one and the same place. For so much as I understand, these have only their arms and legs disengaged from the crowd; their soul and intention remain engaged behind more than ever:

Tun, uetule, auriculis alienis colligis escas?

Dost thou, old man, collect food for others' ears? • Pers., 1.22

they have only retired to take a better leap, and by a stronger motion to give a brisker charge into the crowd. Will you see how they shoot short? Let us put into the counterpoise the advice of two philosophers, of two very different sects, writing, the one to Idomeneus, the other to Lucilius, their friends, to retire into solitude from worldly honors and affairs. "You have,"

say they, "hitherto lived swimming and floating; come now, and die in the harbor: you have given the first part of your life to the light, give what remains to the shade. It is impossible to give over business, if you do not also quit the fruit; therefore disengage yourselves from all concern of name and glory; 'tis to be feared the lustre of your former actions will give you but too much light, and follow you into your most private retreat. Quit with other pleasures that which proceeds from the approbation of another man: and as to your knowledge and parts, never concern yourselves; they will not lose their effect if yourselves be the better for them. Remember him, who being asked why he took so much pains in an art that could come to the knowledge of but few persons? 'A few are enough for me,' replied he; 'I have enough with one; I have enough with never an one.' He said true; you and a companion are theater enough to one another, or you to yourself. Let the people be to you one, and be you one to the whole people. 'Tis an unworthy ambition to think to derive glory from a man's sloth and privacy: you are to do like the beasts of chase, who efface the track at the entrance into their den. You are no more to concern yourself how the world talks of you, but how you are to talk to yourself. Retire yourself into yourself, but first prepare yourself there to receive yourself: it were a folly to trust yourself in your own hands, if you cannot govern yourself. A man may miscarry alone as well as in company. Till you have rendered yourself one before whom you dare not trip, and till you have a bashfulness and respect for yourself, *Obuersentur species honestæ animo;* present continually to your imagination Cato, Phocion, and Aristides, in whose presence the fools themselves will hide their faults, and make them controllers of all your intentions; should these deviate from virtue, your respect to those will set you right; they will keep you in this way to be contented with yourself; to borrow nothing of any other but yourself; to stay and fix your soul in certain and limited thoughts, wherein she may please herself, and having understood the true and real goods, which men the more enjoy the more they understand, to rest satisfied, without desire of prolongation of life or name." This is the precept of the true and natural philosophy, not of a boasting and prating philosophy, such as that of the two former.

Let just and honest things be ever present to the mind; • Cic., Tusc., 2.22

Montaigne's Sources

Cic., Tusc.	Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*
Hor., Carm.	Horace, *Odes*
Hor., Epist.	Horace, *Epistles*
Juv.	Juvenal, *Satires*
Lucr.	Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*
Pers.	Persius, *Satires*

Prop.	Propertius, *Elegies*
Quint., Inst.	Quintilian, *Orator's Education*
Ter., Ad.	Terence, *Adelphi*
Tib.	Tibullus, *Elegiae*
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, *Æneid*