

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 3 · Chapter 8

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On the Art of Discussion

'Tis a custom of our justice to condemn some for a warning to others. To condemn them for having done amiss, were folly, as Platosays, for what is done can never be undone; but 'tis to the end they may offend no more, and that others may avoid the example of their offense. We do not correct the man we hang; we correct others by him. I do the same; my errors are sometimes natural, incorrigible, and irremediable: but the good which virtuous men do to the public, in making themselves imitated, I, peradventure, may do in making my manners avoided:

*Nonne vides, Albi ut male vivat filius, utque
Barrus inops? magnum documentum, ne patriam rem
Perdere quis velit.*

Publishing and accusing my own imperfections, someone will learn to be afraid of them. The parts that I most esteem in myself, derive more honor from decrying, than for commending myself which is the reason why I so often fall into, and so much insist upon that strain. But, when all is summed up, a man never speaks of himself without loss; a man's accusations of himself are always believed; his praises never.

There may, peradventure, be some of my own complexion who better instruct myself by contrariety than by similitude, and by avoiding than by imitation. The elder Catowas regarding this sort of discipline, when he said, "that the wise may learn more of fools, than fools can of the wise;" and Pausanias tells us of an ancient player upon the harp, who was wont to make his scholars go to hear one who played very ill, who lived over against him, that they might learn to hate his discords and false measures. The horror of cruelty more inclines me to clemency, than any example of clemency could possibly do. A good rider does not so much mend my seat, as an awkward attorney or a Venetian on horseback;¹ and a clownish way of speaking more reforms mine than the most correct. The ridiculous and simple look of another always warns and advises me; that which pricks, rouses and incites much better than that which tickles. The time is now proper for us to reform backward; more by dissenting than by agreeing; by

Dost thou not see how ill the son of Albus lives? and how the indigent Barrus? a great warning lest any one should incline to dissipate his patrimony. • HOR., SAT., 1.4.109

differing more than by consent. Profiting little by good examples, I make use of those that are ill, which are everywhere to be found: I endeavor to render myself as agreeable as I see others offensive; as constant as I see others fickle; as affable as I see others rough; as good as I see others evil: but I propose to myself impracticable measures.

The most fruitful and natural exercise of the mind, in my opinion, is conversation; I find the use of it more sweet than of any other action of life; and for that reason it is that, if I were now compelled to choose, I should sooner, I think, consent to lose my sight, than my hearing and speech. The Athenians, and also the Romans, kept this exercise in great honor in their academies; the Italians retain some traces of it to this day, to their great advantage, as is manifest by the comparison of our understandings with theirs. The study of books is a languishing and feeble motion that heats not, whereas conversation teaches and exercises at once. If I converse with a strong mind and a rough disputant, he presses upon my flanks, and pricks me right and left; his imaginations stir up mine; jealousy, glory, and contention, stimulate and raise me up to something above myself; and acquiescence is a quality altogether tedious in discourse.

But, as our mind fortifies itself by the communication of vigorous and regular understandings, 'tis not to be expressed how much it loses and degenerates by the continual commerce and familiarity we have with mean and weak spirits; there is no contagion that spreads like that; I know sufficiently by experience what 'tis worth a yard. I love to discourse and dispute, but it is with but few men, and for myself; for to do it as a spectacle and entertainment to great persons, and to make of a man's wit and words competitive parade is, in my opinion, very unbecoming a man of honor.

Folly is a bad quality; but not to be able to endure it, to fret and vex at it, as I do, is another sort of disease little less troublesome than folly itself; and is the thing that I will now accuse in myself.

I enter into conference, and dispute with great liberty and facility, forasmuch as opinion meets in me with a soil very unfit for penetration, and wherein to take any deep root; no propositions astonish me, no belief offends me, though never so contrary to my own; there is no so frivolous and extravagant fancy that does not seem to me suitable to the production of human wit. We, who deprive our judgment of the right of determining, look indifferently upon the diverse opinions, and if we incline not our judgment to them, yet we easily give them the hearing: Where one scale is totally empty, I let the other waver under an old wife's dreams; and I think myself excusable, if I prefer the odd number; Thursday rather than Friday; if I had rather be the twelfth or fourteenth than the thirteenth at table; if I had rather, on a journey, see a hare run by me than cross my way, and rather give my man my left foot than my right, when he comes to put on my stockings. All such reveries as are in credit around us, deserve at least a hearing: for my part, they only with me import inanity, but they import that. Moreover, vulgar and casual opinions are something more than nothing in nature; and he who will not suffer himself to proceed so far, falls, peradventure, into the vice of obstinacy, to avoid that of superstition.

The contradictions of judgments, then, neither offend nor alter, they only rouse and exercise, me. We evade correction, whereas we ought to offer and present ourselves to it, especially when it appears in the form of conference, and not of authority. At every opposition, we do not consider whether or no it be dust, but, right or wrong, how to disengage ourselves: instead of extending the arms, we thrust out our claws. I could suffer myself to be rudely handled by my friend, so much as to tell me that I am a fool, and talk I know not of what. I love stout expressions among gentle men, and to have them speak as they think; we must fortify and harden our hearing against this tenderness of the ceremonious sound of words. I love a strong and manly familiarity and conversation: a friendship that pleases itself in the sharpness and vigor of its communication, like love in biting and scratching.

Friendship is not vigorous and generous enough, if it be not quarrelsome, if it be civilized and artificial, if it treads nicely and fears the shock.

Neque enim disputari sine reprehensione potest.

Nor can people dispute without reprehension. • CIC., FIN., 1.8

When any one contradicts me, he raises my attention, not my anger: I advance toward him who controverts, who instructs me; the cause of truth ought to be the common cause both of the one and the other. What will the angry man answer? Passion has already confounded his judgment; agitation has usurped the place of reason. It were not amiss that the decision of our disputes should pass by wager: that there might be a material mark of our losses, to the end we might the better remember them; and that my man might tell me: "Your ignorance and obstinacy cost you last year, at several times, a hundred crowns."

I hail and caress truth in what quarter soever I find it, and cheerfully surrender myself, and open my conquered arms as far off as I can discover it; and, provided it be not too imperiously, take a pleasure in being reprov'd, and accommodate myself to my accusers, very often more by reason of civility than amendment, loving to gratify and nourish the liberty of admonition by my facility of submitting to it, and this even at my own expense. Nevertheless, it is hard to bring the men of my time to it: they have not the courage to correct, because they have not the courage to suffer themselves to be corrected; and speak always with dissimulation in the presence of one another: I take so great a pleasure in being judged and known, that it is almost indifferent to me in which of the two forms I am so: my imagination so often contradicts and condemns itself, that 'tis all one to me if another do it, especially considering that I give his reprehension no greater authority than I choose; but I break with him, who carries himself so high, as I know of one who repents his advice, if not believed, and takes it for an affront if it be not immediately followed. That Socrates always received smilingly the contradictions offered to his arguments, a man may say arose from his strength of reason; and that, the advantage being certain to fall on his side, he accepted them as a matter of new victory. But we see, on the contrary, that nothing in argument renders our sentiment so delicate, as the opinion of pre-eminence, and disdain of the adversary; and that, in reason, 'tis rather for the weaker to take in good part the oppositions that correct him and set him right. In earnest, I

rather choose the company of those who ruffle me than of those who fear me; 'tis a dull and hurtful pleasure to have to do with people who admire us and approve of all we say. Antisthenes commanded his children never to take it kindly or for a favor, when any man commended them. I find I am much prouder of the victory I obtain over myself, when, in the very ardor of dispute, I make myself submit to my adversary's force of reason, than I am pleased with the victory I obtain over him through his weakness.

In fine, I receive and admit of all manner of attacks that are direct, how weak soever; but I am too impatient of those that are made out of form. I care not what the subject is, the opinions are to me all one, and I am almost indifferent whether I get the better or the worse. I can peaceably argue a whole day together, if the argument be carried on with method; I do not so much require force and subtlety as order; I mean the order which we every day observe in the wranglings of shepherds and shop-boys, but never among us: if they start from their subject, 'tis out of incivility, and so 'tis with us; but their tumult and impatience never put them out of their theme; their argument still continues its course; if they interrupt, and do not stay for one another, they at least understand one another. Any one answers too well for me, if he answers what I say: when the dispute is irregular and disordered, I leave the thing itself, and insist upon the form with anger and indiscretion; falling into wilful, malicious, and imperious way of disputation, of which I am afterward ashamed.

'Tis impossible to deal fairly with a fool: my judgment is not only corrupted under the hand of so impetuous a master, but my conscience also.

Our disputes ought to be interdicted and punished as well as other verbal crimes: what vice do they not raise and heap up, being always governed and commanded by passion? We first quarrel with their reasons, and then with the men. We only learn to dispute that we may contradict; and so, every one contradicting and being contradicted, it falls out that the fruit of disputation is to lose and annihilate truth. Therefore it is that Plato in his *Republic* prohibits this exercise to fools and ill-bred people.

To what end do you go about to inquire of him, who knows nothing to the purpose? A man does no injury to the subject, when he leaves it to seek how he may treat it; I do not mean by an artificial and scholastic way, but by a natural one, with a sound understanding. What will it be in the end? One flies to the east, the other to the west; they lose the principal, dispersing it in the crowd of incidents after an hour of tempest, they know not what they seek: one is low, the other high, and a third wide. One catches at a word and a simile; another is no longer sensible of what is said in opposition to him, and thinks only of going on at his own rate, not of answering you: another, finding himself too weak to make good his rest, fears all, refuses all, at the very beginning, confounds the subject; or, in the very height of the dispute, stops short and is silent, by a peevish ignorance affecting a proud contempt or a foolishly modest avoidance of further debate: provided this man strikes, he cares not how much he lays himself open; the other counts his words, and weighs them for reasons; another only brawls, and uses the advantage of his lungs. Here's one who learnedly concludes against himself, and another who deafens you with prefaces and

senseless digressions: an other falls into downright railing, and seeks a quarrel after the German fashion, to disengage himself from a wit that presses too hard upon him: and a last man sees nothing into the reason of the thing, but draws a line of circumvallation about you of dialectic clauses, and the formulas of his art.

Now, who would not enter into distrust of sciences, and doubt whether he can reap from them any solid fruit for the service of life, considering the use we put them to? *Nihil sanantibus litteris*. Who has got understanding by his logic? Where are all her fair promises? *Nec ad melius vivendum, nec ad commodius disserendum*. Is there more noise or confusion in the scolding of herring-wives than in the public disputes of men of this profession? I had rather my son should learn in a tap-house to speak, than in the schools to prate. Take a master of arts, and confer with him: why does he not make us sensible of this artificial excellence? and why does he not captivate women and ignoramuses, as we are, with admiration at the steadiness of his reasons and the beauty of his order? why does he not sway and persuade us to what he will? why does a man, who has so much advantage in matter and treatment, mix railing, indiscretion, and fury in his disputations? Strip him of his gown, his hood, and his Latin, let him not batter our ears with Aristotle, pure and simple, you will take him for one of us, or worse. Whilst they torment us with this complication and confusion of words, it fares with them, methinks, as with jugglers; their dexterity imposes upon our senses, but does not at all work upon our belief this legerdemain excepted, they perform nothing that is not very ordinary and mean: for being the more learned, they are none the less fools.

I love and honor knowledge as much as they that have it, and in its true use 'tis the most noble and the greatest acquisition of men; but in such as I speak of (and the number of them is infinite), who build their fundamental sufficiency and value upon it, who appeal from their understanding to their memory, *sub aliena umbra latentes*. And who can do nothing but by book, I hate it, if I dare to say so, worse than stupidity. In my country, and in my time, learning improves fortunes enough, but not minds; if it meet with those that are dull and heavy, it overcharges and suffocates them, leaving them a crude and undigested mass; if airy and fine, it purifies, clarifies, and subtilizes them, even to exinanition. 'Tis a thing of almost indifferent quality; a very useful accession to a well-born soul, but hurtful and pernicious to others; or rather a thing of very precious use, that will not suffer itself to be purchased at an under rate; in the hand of some 'tis a sceptre, in that of others a fool's bauble. But let us proceed.

What greater victory do you expect than to make your enemy see and know that he is not able to encounter you? When you get the better of your argument; 'tis truth that wins; when you get the advantage of form and method, 'tis then you who win. I am of opinion that, in Plato and Xenophon, Socrates disputes more in favor of the disputants than in favor of the dispute, and more to instruct Euthydemus and Protagoras in the knowledge of their impertinence, than in the impertinence of their art. He takes hold of the first subject like one who has a more profitable end than to explain it—namely, to clear the understandings that he takes upon him to instruct and exercise. To hunt after truth is properly our business, and

Letters which cure nothing. • SEN.,
EP., 59

It neither makes a man live better
nor talk better. • CIC., FIN., 1.19

Sheltering under the shadow of
others. • SEN., EP., 33

we are inexcusable if we carry on the chase impertinently and ill; to fail of seizing it is another thing, for we are born to inquire after truth: it belongs to a greater power to possess it. It is not, as Democritus said, hid in the bottom of the deeps, but rather elevated to an infinite height in the divine knowledge. The world is but a school of inquisition: it is not who shall enter the ring, but who shall run the best courses. He may as well play the fool who speaks true, as he who speaks false, for we are upon the manner, not the matter, of speaking. 'Tis my humor as much to regard the form as the substance, and the advocate as much as the cause, as Alcibiades ordered we should.

And every day pass away my time in reading authors without any consideration of their learning; their manner is what I look after, not their subject: And just so do I hunt after the conversation of any eminent wit, not that he may teach me, but that I may know him, and that knowing him, if I think him worthy of imitation, I may imitate him.

Every man may speak truly, but to speak methodically, prudently, and fully, is a talent that few men have. The falsity that proceeds from ignorance does not offend me, but the foppery of it. I have broken off several treatises that would have been of advantage to me, by reason of the impertinent contestations of those with whom I treated. I am not moved once in a year at the faults of those over whom I have authority, but upon the account of the ridiculous obstinacy of their allegations, denials, excuses, we are every day going together by the ears; they neither understand what is said, nor why, and answer accordingly; 'tis enough to drive a man mad. I never feel any hurt upon my head but when 'tis knocked against another, and more easily forgive the vices of my servants than their boldness, importunity, and folly; let them do less, provided they understand what they do: you live in hope to warm their affection to your service, but there is nothing to be had or to be expected from a stock.

But what, if I take things otherwise than they are? Perhaps I do; and therefore it is that I accuse my own impatience, and hold, in the first place, that it is equally vicious both in him that is in the right, and in him that is in the wrong; for 'tis always a tyrannic sourness not to endure a form contrary to one's own: and, besides, there cannot, in truth, be a greater, more constant, nor more irregular folly than to be moved and angry at the follies of the world, for it principally makes us quarrel with ourselves; and the old philosopher never wanted an occasion for his tears whilst he considered himself. Miso, one of the seven sages, of a Timonian and Democritic humor, being asked, "what he laughed at, being alone?" — "That I do laugh alone," answered he.

How many ridiculous things, in my own opinion, do I say and answer every day that comes over my head? and then how many more, according to the opinion of others? If I bite my own lips, what ought others to do? In fine, we must live among the living, and let the river run under the bridge without our care, or, at least, without our interference. In truth, why do we meet a man with a hunch-back, or any other deformity, without being moved, and cannot endure the encounter of a deformed mind without being angry? this vicious sourness sticks more to the judge than to the

crime. Let us always have this saying of Plato in our mouths: "Do not I think things unsound, because I am not sound in myself? Am I not myself in fault? may not my observations reflect upon myself?" — a wise and divine saying, that lashes the most universal and common error of mankind. Not only the reproaches that we throw in the face of one another, but our reasons also, our arguments and controversies, are reboundable upon us, and we wound ourselves with our own weapons: of which antiquity has left me enough grave examples. It was ingeniously and home-said by him, who was the inventor of this sentence:

Stercus cuique suum bene olet.

To each one their own manure smells good. • ERASMUS, AD., 3.4.2

We see nothing behind us; we mock ourselves an hundred times a day; when we deride our neighbors; and we detest in others the defects which are more manifest in us, and which we admire with marvellous inadvertency and impudence. It was but yesterday that I heard a man of understanding and of good rank, as pleasantly as justly scoffing at the folly of another, who did nothing but torment everybody with the catalog of his genealogy and alliances, above half of them false (for they are most apt to fall into such ridiculous discourses, whose qualities are most dubious and least sure), and yet, would he have looked into himself, he would have discerned himself to be no less intemperate and wearisome in extolling his wife's pedigree. O importunate presumption, with which the wife sees herself armed by the hands of her own husband. Did he understand Latin, we should say to him:

Age, si hic non insanit satis sua sponte, instiga.

Come! if of himself he is not mad enough, urge him on. • TER., AN., 4.2.9

I do not say that no man should accuse another, who is not clean himself—for then no one would ever accuse—clean from the same sort of spot; but I mean that our judgment, falling upon another who is then in question, should not, at the same time, spare ourselves, but sentence us with an inward and severe authority. 'Tis an office of charity, that he who cannot reclaim himself from a vice, should, nevertheless, endeavor to remove it from another, in whom, peradventure, it may not have so deep and so malignant a root; neither do him who reproves me for my fault that he himself is guilty of the same. What of that? The reproof is, notwithstanding, true and of very good use. Had we a good nose, our own ordure would stink worse to us, forasmuch as it is our own: and Socrates is of opinion that whoever should find himself, his son, and a stranger guilty of any violence and wrong, ought to begin with himself, present himself first to the sentence of justice, and implore, to purge himself, the assistance of the hand of the executioner; in the next place, he should proceed to his son, and lastly, to the stranger. If this precept seem too severe, he ought at least to present himself the first, to the punishment of his own conscience.

The senses are our first and proper judges, which perceive not things but by external accidents; and 'tis no wonder, if in all the parts of the service of our society, there is so perpetual and universal a mixture of ceremonies and superficial appearances; insomuch that the best and most effectual part of our polities therein consist. 'Tis still man with whom we have to do,

of whom the condition is wonderfully corporal. Let those who, of these late years, would erect for us such a contemplative and immaterial an exercise of religion, not wonder if there be some who think it had vanished and melted through their fingers had it not more upheld itself among us as a mark, title, and instrument of division and faction, than by itself. As in conference, the gravity, robe, and fortune of him who speaks, oftentimes gives reputation to vain arguments and idle words, it is not to be presumed but that a man, so attended and feared, has not in him more than ordinary sufficiency; and that he to whom the king has given so many offices and commissions and charges, he so supercilious and proud, has not a great deal more in him, than another who salutes him at so great a distance, and who has no employment at all. Not only the words, but the grimaces also of these people, are considered and put into the account; every one making it his business to give them some fine and solid interpretation. If they stoop to the common conference, and that you offer anything but approbation and reverence, they then knock you down with the authority of their experience: they have heard, they have seen, they have done so and so: you are crushed with examples. I should willingly tell them, that the fruit of a surgeon's experience, is not the history of his practice and his remembering that he has cured four people of the plague and three of the gout, unless he knows how thence to extract something whereon to form his judgment, and to make us sensible that he has thence become more skillful in his art. As in a concert of instruments, we do not hear a lute, a harpsichord, or a flute alone, but one entire harmony, the result of all together. If travel and offices have improved them, 'tis a product of their understanding to make it appear. 'Tis not enough to reckon experiences, they must weigh, sort and distil them, to extract the reasons and conclusions they carry along with them. There were never so many historians: it is, indeed, good and of use to read them, for they furnish us everywhere with excellent and laudable instructions from the magazine of their memory, which, doubtless, is of great concern to the help of life; but 'tis not that we seek for now: we examine whether these relaters and collectors of things are commendable themselves.

I hate all sorts of tyranny, both in word and deed. I am very ready to oppose myself against those vain circumstances that delude our judgments by the senses; and keeping my eye close upon those extraordinary greatnesses, I find that at best they are men, as others are.

*Rarus enim ferme sensus communis in illa
Fortuna.*

For in those high fortunes, common sense is generally rare. • Juv., 8.73

Peradventure, we esteem and look upon them for less than they are, by reason they undertake more, and more expose themselves; they do not answer to the charge they have undertaken. There must be more vigor and strength in the bearer than in the burden; he who has not lifted as much as he can, leaves you to guess that he has still a strength beyond that, and that he has not been tried to the utmost of what he is able to do; he who sinks under his load, makes a discovery of his best, and the weakness of his shoulders. This is the reason that we see so many silly souls among the learned, and more than those of the better sort: they would have made good husbandmen, good merchants, and good artisans: their natural vigor

was cut out to that proportion. Knowledge is a thing of great weight, they faint under it: their understanding has neither vigor nor dexterity enough to set forth and distribute, to employ or make use of this rich and powerful matter; it has no prevailing virtue but in a strong nature; and such natures are very rare — and the weak ones, says Socrates, corrupt the dignity of philosophy in the handling, it appears useless and vicious, when lodged in an ill-contrived mind. They spoil and make fools of themselves,

*Humani qualis simulator simius oris,
Quem puer arridens pretioso stamine serum
Velavit, nudasque nates ac terga reliquit,
Ludibrium mensis.*

Neither is it enough for those who govern and command us, and have all the world in their hands, to have a common understanding, and to be able to do the same that we can; they are very much below us, if they be not infinitely above us: as they promise more, so they are to perform more. And yet silence is to them, not only a countenance of respect and gravity, but very often of good advantage too: for Megabysus, going to see Apelles in his painting-room, stood a great while without speaking a word, and at last began to talk of his paintings, for which he received this rude reproof: “Whilst thou wast silent, thou seemedst to be some great thing, by reason of thy chains and rich habit; but now that we have heard thee speak, there is not the meanest boy in my workshop that does not despise thee.” Those princely ornaments, that mighty state, did not permit him to be ignorant with a common ignorance, and to speak impertinently of painting; he ought to have kept this external and presumptive knowledge by silence. To how many foolish fellows of my time has a sullen and silent mien procured the credit of prudence and capacity!

Dignities and offices are of necessity conferred more by fortune than upon the account of merit; and we are often to blame, to condemn kings when these are misplaced: on the contrary, 'tis a wonder they should have so good luck, where there is so little skill:

Principis est virtus maxima nosse suos;

for nature has not given them a sight that can extend to so many people, to discern which excels the rest, nor to penetrate into our bosoms, where the knowledge of our wills and best value lies they must choose us by conjecture and by groping; by the family, wealth, learning, and the voice of the people, which are all very feeble arguments. Whoever could find out a way by which they might judge by justice, and choose men by reason, would, in this one thing, establish a perfect form of government.

“Ay, but he brought that great affair to a very good pass.” This is, indeed, to say something, but not to say enough: for this sentence is justly received, “That we are not to judge of counsels by events.” The Carthaginians punished the ill counsels of their captains, though they were rectified by a successful issue; and the Roman people often denied a triumph for great and very advantageous victories because the conduct of their general was not answerable to his good fortune. We ordinarily see, in the actions of the

Just like an ape, simulator of the human face, whom a wanton boy has dizen'd up in rich silks above, but left the lower parts bare, for a laughing-stock for the tables. •

CLAUD., EU., 1.303

'Tis the chief virtue of a prince to know his people. • MART., 8.15

world, that Fortune, to shew us her power in all things, and who takes a pride in abating our presumption, seeing she could not make fools wise, has made them fortunate in emulation of virtue; and most favors those operations the web of which is most purely her own; whence it is that the simplest among us bring to pass great business, both public and private; and, as Seiramnes, the Persian, answered those who wondered that his affairs succeeded so ill, considering that his deliberations were so wise, “that he was sole master of his designs, but that success was wholly in the power of fortune;” these may answer the same, but with a contrary turn. Most worldly affairs are performed by themselves,

Fata viam inveniunt.

Fate finds a way. • VERG., AEN., 3.395

The event often justifies a very foolish conduct; our interposition is little more than as it were a running on by rote, and more commonly a consideration of custom and example, than of reason. Being formerly astonished at the greatness of some affair, I have been made acquainted with their motives and address by those who had performed it, and have found nothing in it but very ordinary counsels; and the most common and usual are indeed, perhaps, the most sure and convenient for practice, if not for show.

What if the plainest reasons are the best seated? the meanest, lowest, and most beaten more adapted to affairs? To maintain the authority of the counsels of kings, it needs not that profane persons should participate of them, or see further into them than the outmost barrier; he who will husband its reputation must be revered upon credit and taken altogether. My consultation somewhat rough-hews the matter, and considers it lightly by the first face it presents: the stress and main of the business I have been wont to refer to heaven:

Permitte divis cætera.

Leave the rest to the gods. • HOR.,
CARM., 1.9.9

Good and ill fortune are, in my opinion, two sovereign powers; 'tis folly to think that human prudence can play the part of Fortune; and vain is his attempt who presumes to comprehend both causes and consequences, and by the hand to conduct the progress of his design; and most especially vain in the deliberations of war. There was never greater circumspection and military prudence than sometimes is seen among us: can it be that men are afraid to lose themselves by the way, that they reserve themselves to the end of the game?

I moreover affirm that our wisdom itself and consultation, for the most part commit themselves to the conduct of chance; my will and my reason are sometimes moved by one breath, and sometimes by another; and many of these movements there are that govern themselves without me: my reason has uncertain and casual agitations and impulsions:

*Vertuntur species animorum, & pectora motus
Nunc alios, alios, dum nubila ventus agebat,
Concipiunt.*

The aspects of their minds change;
and they conceive now such ideas,
now such, just so long as the wind
agitated the clouds. • VERG., G., 1.42

Let a man but observe who are of greatest authority in cities, and who best do their own business; we shall find that they are commonly men of the least parts: women, children, and madmen have had the fortune to govern great kingdoms equally well with the wisest princes, and Thucydides says, that the stupid more ordinarily do it than those of better understandings; we attribute the effects of their good fortune to their prudence.

*ut quisque Fortuna utitur
Ita præcellet; atque exinde sapere illum omnes dicimus.*

He makes his way who knows how to use Fortune, and thereupon we all call him wise. • PLAUT., PSEUD., 2.3.13

Wherefore I say unreservedly, events are a very poor testimony of our worth and parts.

Now, I was upon this point, that there needs no more but to see a man promoted to dignity; though we knew him but three days before a man of little regard, yet an image of grandeur of sufficiency insensibly steals into our opinion, and we persuade ourselves that, being augmented in reputation and train, he is also increased in merit; we judge of him, not according to his worth, but as we do by counters, according to the prerogative of his place. If it happen so that he fall again, and be mixed with the common crowd, every one inquires with amazement into the cause of his having been raised so high. "Is this he," say they, "was he no wiser when he was there? Do princes satisfy themselves with so little? Truly, we were in good hands." This is a thing that I have often seen in my time. Nay, even the very disguise of grandeur represented in our comedies in some sort moves and gulls us. That which I myself adore in kings is the crowd of their adorers; all reverence and submission are due to them, except that of the understanding: my reason is not obliged to bow and bend; my knees are.

Melanthius being asked what he thought of the tragedy of Dionysius, "I could not see it," said he, "it was so clouded with language"; so most of those who judge of the discourses of great men ought to say, "I did not understand his words, they were so clouded with gravity, grandeur, and majesty."

Antisthenes one day tried to persuade the Athenians to give order that their asses might be employed in tilling the ground as well as the horses were; to which it was answered that that animal was not destined for such a service: "That's all one," replied he, "you have only to order it: for the most ignorant and incapable men you employ in the commands of your wars incontinently become worthy enough, because you employ them."

To which the custom of so many people, who canonize the king they have chosen out of their own body, and are not content only to honor, but must adore them, comes very near. Those of Mexico, after the ceremonies of their king's coronation are over, dare no more look him in the face; but, as if they had deified him by his royalty. Among the oaths they make him take to maintain their religion, their laws, and liberties, to be valiant, just, and mild, he moreover swears to make the sun run his course in his wonted light, to drain the clouds at fit seasons, to make rivers run their course, and to cause the earth to bear all things necessary for his people.

I differ from this common fashion, and am more apt to suspect the capacity when I see it accompanied with that grandeur of fortune and public applause; we are to consider of what advantage it is to speak when a man pleases, to choose his subject, to interrupt or change it, with a magisterial authority; to protect himself from the oppositions of others by a nod, a smile, or silence, in the presence of an assembly that trembles with reverence and respect.

A man of a prodigious fortune coming to give his judgment upon some slight dispute that was foolishly set on foot at his table, began in these words: "It can be no other but a liar or a fool that will say otherwise than so and so." Pursue this philosophical point with a dagger in your hand.

There is another observation I have made, from which I draw great advantage; which is, that in conferences and disputes, every word that seems to be good, is not immediately to be accepted. Most men are rich in borrowed sufficiency: a man may say a good thing, give a good answer, cite a good sentence, without at all seeing the force of either the one or the other. That a man may not understand all he borrows, may perhaps be verified in myself. A man must not always presently yield, what truth or beauty soever may seem to be in the opposite argument; either he must stoutly meet it, or retire, under color of not understanding it, to try, on all parts, how it is lodged in the author. It may happen that we entangle ourselves, and help to strengthen the point itself. I have sometimes, in the necessity and heat of the combat, made answers that have gone through and through, beyond my expectation or hope; I only gave them in number, they were received in weight. As, when I contend with a vigorous man, I please myself with anticipating his conclusions, I ease him of the trouble of explaining himself, I strive to forestall his imagination whilst it is yet springing and imperfect; the order and pertinency of his understanding warn and threaten me afar off: I deal quite contrary with the others; I must understand, and presuppose nothing but by them. If they determine in general words, "this is good, that is naught," and that they happen to be in the right, see if it be not fortune that hits it off for them.

let them a little circumscribe and limit their judgment; why, or how, it is so. These universal judgments that I see so common, signify nothing; these are men who salute a whole people in a crowd together; they, who have a real acquaintance, take notice of and salute them individually and by name. But 'tis a hazardous attempt; and from which I have, more than every day, seen it fall out, that weak understandings, having a mind to appear ingenious, in taking notice, as they read a book, of what is best and most to be admired, fix their admiration upon some thing so very ill chosen, that instead of making us discern the excellence of the author; they make us very well see their own ignorance. This exclamation is safe, "That is fine," after having heard a whole page of Virgil; by that the cunning sort save themselves; but to undertake to follow him line by line, and, with an expert and tried judgment, to observe where a good author excels himself, weighing the words, phrases, inventions, and his various excellences, one after another; keep aloof from that. *Videndum est non modo quid quisque loquatur, Sed etiam quid quisque sentiat, atque etiam qua de causa quisque sentiat.* I every day hear fools say things that are not foolish: they

A man is not only to examine what every one says, but also what every one thinks, and from what reason

say a good thing; let us examine how far they understand it, whence they have it, and what they mean by it. We help them to make use of this fine expression, of this fine sentence, which is none of theirs; they only have it in keeping; they have bolted it out at a venture; we place it for them in credit and esteem.

every one thinks. • CIC., OFF., 1.41

You lend them your hand. To what purpose? they do not think themselves obliged to you for it, and become more inept still. Don't help them; let them alone; they will handle the matter like people who are afraid of burning their fingers; they dare change neither its seat nor light, nor break into it; shake it never so little, it slips through their fingers; they give it up, be it never so strong or fair they are fine weapons, but ill hafted: How many times have I seen the experience of this? Now, if you come to explain anything to them, and to confirm them, they catch at it, and presently rob you of the advantage of your interpretation; "It was what I was about to say; it was just my idea; if I did not express it so, it was for want of language." Mere wind! Malice itself must be employed to correct this arrogant ignorance. The dogma of Hegesias, "that we are neither to hate nor accuse, but instruct," is correct elsewhere; but here 'tis injustice and inhumanity to relieve and set him right who stands in no need on't, and is the worse for it. I love to let them step deeper into the mire; and so deep, that, if it be possible, they may at last discern their error.

Folly and absurdity are not to be cured by bare admonition; and what Cyrus answered to him, who importuned him to harangue his army, upon the point of battle, "that men do not become valiant and warlike upon a sudden, by a fine oration, no more than a man becomes a good musician by hearing a fine song," may properly be said of such an admonition as this. These are apprenticeships that are to be served beforehand, by a long and continued education.

We owe this care and this assiduity of correction and instruction to our own people; but to go preach to the first passer-by, and to become tutor to the ignorance and folly of the first we meet, is a thing that I abhor. I rarely do it, even in private conversation, and rather give up the whole thing than proceed to these initiatory and school instructions; my humor is unfit either to speak or write for beginners; but for things that are said in common discourse, or among other things, I never oppose them either by word or sign, how false or absurd soever. As to the rest, nothing vexes me so much in folly as that it is more satisfied with itself than any reason can reasonably be.

'Tis unfortunate that prudence forbids us to satisfy and trust ourselves, and always dismisses us timorous and discontented; whereas obstinacy and temerity fill those who are possessed with them with joy and assurance. 'Tis for the most ignorant to look at other men over the shoulder, always returning from the combat full of joy and triumph. And moreover, for the most part, this arrogance of speech and gaiety of countenance gives them the better of it in the opinion of the audience, which is commonly weak and incapable of well judging and discerning the real advantage. Obstinacy of opinion and heat in argument are the surest

proofs of folly; is there anything so assured, resolute, disdainful, contemplative, serious and grave as the ass?

May we not include under the title of conference and communication the quick and sharp repartees which mirth and familiarity introduce among friends, pleasantly and wittily jesting and rallying with one another? 'Tis an exercise for which my natural gaiety renders me fit enough, and which, if it be not so tense and serious as the other I spoke of but now, is, as Lycurgus thought, no less smart and ingenious, nor of less utility. For my part, I contribute to it more liberty than wit, and have therein more of luck than invention; but I am perfect in suffering, for I endure a retaliation that is not only tart, but indiscreet to boot, without being moved at all; and whoever attacks me, if I have not a brisk answer immediately ready, I do not study to pursue the point with a tedious and impertinent contest, bordering upon obstinacy, but let it pass, and hanging down cheerfully my ears, defer my revenge to another and better time: there is no merchant that always gains: Most men change their countenance and their voice where their wits fail, and by an unseasonable anger, instead of revenging themselves, accuse at once their own folly and impatience. In this jollity, we sometimes pinch the secret strings of our imperfections which, at another and graver time, we cannot touch without offense, and so profitably give one another a hint of our defects.

There are other *jeux de main*, rude and indiscreet, after the French manner, that I mortally hate; my skin is very tender and sensible: I have in my time seen two princes of the blood buried upon that very account. 'Tis unhandsome to fight in play.

As to the rest, when I have a mind to judge of any one, I ask him how far he is contented with himself; to what degree his speaking or his work pleases him. I will none of these fine excuses, "I did it only in sport,

Ablatum mediis opus est incudibus istud;

That work was taken from the anvil
half finished; • Ov., *TRI.*, 1.6.29

I was not an hour about it: I have never looked at it since."

Well, then, say I, lay these aside, and give me a perfect one, such as you would be measured by. And then, what do you think is the best thing in your work? is it this part or that? is it grace or the matter, the invention, the judgment, or the learning? For I find that men are, commonly, as wide of the mark in judging of their own works, as of those of others; not only by reason of the kindness they have for them, but for want of capacity to know and distinguish them: the work, by its own force and fortune, may second the workman, and sometimes outstrip him, beyond his invention and knowledge. For my part, I judge of the value of other men's works more obscurely than of my own; and place the *Essays*, now high, or low, with great doubt and inconstancy.

There are several books that are useful upon the account of their subjects, from which the author derives no praise; and good books, as well as good works, that shame the workman. I may write the manner of our feasts, and the fashion of our clothes, and may write them ill; I may publish the

edicts of my time, and the letters of princes that pass from hand to hand; I may make an abridgment of a good book (and every abridgment of a good book is a foolish abridgment), which book shall come to be lost; and so on: posterity will derive a singular utility from such compositions: but what honor shall I have unless by great good fortune? Most part of the famous books are of this condition.

When I read Philippe de Commines, doubtless a very good author, several years ago, I there took notice of this for no vulgar saying, "That a man must have a care not to do his master so great service, that at last he will not know how to give him his just reward;" but I ought to commend the invention, not him, because I met with it in Tacitus, not long since: *Beneficia ea usque læta sunt, dum videntur exsolvi posse; ubi multum antevenere, pro gratis odium redditur.* And Seneca vigorously says: *Nam qui putat esse turpe non reddere, non vult esse cui reddat.* Q. Cicero says with less directness: *Qui se non putat satisfacere, amicus esse nullo modo potest.*

The subject, according to what it is, may make a man looked upon as learned and of good memory; but to judge in him the parts that are most his own and the most worthy, the vigor and beauty of his soul, one must first know what is his own and what is not; and in that which is not his own, how much we are obliged to him for the choice, disposition, ornament, and language he has there presented us with. What if he has borrowed the matter and spoiled the form, as it often falls out? We, who are little read in books, are in this strait, that when we meet with a high fancy in some new poet, or some strong argument in a preacher, we dare not, nevertheless, commend it till we have first informed ourselves, through some learned man, if it be the writer's wit or borrowed from some other; until that I always stand upon my guard.

I have lately been reading the history of Tacitus quite through, without interrupting it with anything else (which but seldom happens with me, it being twenty years since I have kept to any one book an hour together), and I did it at the instance of a gentleman for whom France has a great esteem, as well for his own particular worth, as upon the account of a constant form of capacity and virtue which runs through a great many brothers of them. I do not know any author in a public narrative who mixes so much consideration of manners and particular inclinations: and I am of a quite contrary opinion to him, holding that, having especially to follow the lives of the emperors of his time, so various and extreme in all sorts of forms, so many notable actions as their cruelty especially produced in their subjects, he had a stronger and more attractive matter to treat of than if he had had to describe battles and universal commotions; so that I often find him sterile, running over those brave deaths as if he feared to trouble us with their multitude and length.

This form of history is by much the most useful; public movements depend most upon the conduct of fortune, private ones upon our own. 'Tis rather a judgment than a narration of history; there are in it more precepts than stories: it is not a book to read, 'tis a book to study and learn; 'tis full of sententious opinions, right or wrong; 'tis a nursery of discourses on ethics and politics, for the use and ornament of those who have any place in the

Benefits are so far acceptable as they appear to be capable of recompense; where they much exceed that point, hatred is returned instead of thanks.

• TAC., ANN., 4.18

For he who thinks it a shame not to requite, does not wish to have the man live to whom he owes return. • SEN., EP., 81

Who thinks himself behind in obligation, can by no means be a friend. • CIC., PET., 9

government of the world. He always argues by strong and solid reasons, after a pointed and subtle manner, according to the affected style of that age, which was so in love with an inflated manner, that where point and subtlety were wanting in things it supplied these with lofty and swelling words. 'Tis not much unlike the style of Seneca: I look upon Tacitus as more sinewy, and Seneca as more sharp. His pen seems most proper for a troubled and sick state, as ours at present is; you would often say that he paints and pinches us.

They who doubt his good faith sufficiently accuse themselves of being his enemy upon some other account. His opinions are sound, and lean to the right side in the Roman affairs. And yet I am angry at him for judging more severely of Pompey than consists with the opinion of those worthy men who lived in the same time, and had dealings with him; and to have reputed him on a par with Marius and Sylla, excepting that he was more close. Other writers have not acquitted his intention in the government of affairs from ambition and revenge; and even his friends were afraid that victory would have transported him beyond the bounds of reason, but not to so immeasurable a degree as theirs; nothing in his life threatened such express cruelty and tyranny. Neither ought we to set suspicion against evidence; and therefore I do not believe Plutarch in this matter. That his narrations were genuine and straightforward may, perhaps, be argued from this very thing, that they do not always apply to the conclusions of his judgments, which he follows according to the bias he has taken, very often beyond the matter he presents us withal, which he has not deigned to alter in the least degree. He needs no excuse for having approved the religion of his time, according as the laws enjoined, and to have been ignorant of the true; this was his misfortune, not his fault.

I have principally considered his judgment, and am not very well satisfied therewith throughout; as these words in the letter that Tiberius, old and sick, sent to the senate. "What shall I write to you, sirs, or how should I write to you, or what should I not write to you at this time? May the gods and goddesses lay a worse punishment upon me than I am every day tormented with, if I know!" I do not see why he should so positively apply them to a sharp remorse that tormented the conscience of Tiberius; at least, when I was in the same condition, I perceived no such thing.

And this also seemed to me a little mean in him that, having to say that he had borne an honorable office in Rome, he excuses himself that he does not say it out of ostentation; this seems, I say, mean for such a soul as his; for not to speak roundly of a man's self implies some want of courage; a man of solid and lofty judgment, who judges soundly and surely, makes use of his own example upon all occasions, as well as those of others; and gives evidence as freely of himself as of a third person. We are to pass by these common rules of civility, in favor of truth and liberty. I dare not only speak of myself, but to speak only of myself: when I write of anything else, I miss my way and wander from my subject. I am not so indiscreetly enamored of myself, so wholly mixed up with, and bound to myself, that I cannot distinguish and consider myself apart, as I do a neighbor or a tree: 'tis equally a fault not to discern how far a man's worth extends, and to say

more than a man discovers in himself. We owe more love to God than to ourselves, and know Him less; and yet speak of Him as much as we will.

If the writings of Tacitus indicate anything true of his qualities, he was a great personage, upright and bold, not of a superstitious but of a philosophical and generous virtue. One may think him bold in his relations; as where he tells us, that a soldier carrying a burden of wood, his hands were so frozen and so stuck to the load that they there remained closed and dead, being severed from his arms. I always in such things bow to the authority of so great witnesses.

What also he says, that Vespasian, “by the favor of the god Serapis, cured a blind woman at Alexandria by anointing her eyes with his spittle, and I know not what other miracle,” he says by the example and duty of all his good historians. They record all events of importance; and among public incidents are the popular rumors and opinions. ’Tis their part to relate common beliefs, not to regulate them: that part concerns divines and philosophers, directors of consciences; and therefore it was that this companion of his, and a great man like himself, very wisely said: *Equidem plura transcribo, quam credo: nam nec affirmare sustineo, de quibus dubito, nec subducere quæ accepi*; And this other: *Hæc neque affirmare neque refellere operæ pretium est; famæ rerum standum est*; And writing in an age wherein the belief of prodigies began to decline, he says he would not, nevertheless, forbear to insert in his *Annals*, and to give a relation of things received by so many worthy men, and with so great reverence of antiquity; ’tis very well said. Let them deliver to us history, more as they receive it than as they believe it. I, who am monarch of the matter whereof I treat, and who am accountable to none, do not, nevertheless, always believe myself; I often hazard sallies of my own wit, wherein I very much suspect myself, and certain verbal quibbles, at which I shake my ears; but I let them go at a venture. I see that others get reputation by such things: ’tis not for me alone to judge. I present myself standing and lying, before and behind, my right side and my left, and, in all my natural postures. Wits, though equal in force, are not always equal in taste and application.

This is what my memory presents to me in gross, and with uncertainty enough; all judgments in gross are weak and imperfect.

Truly, I set down more things than I believe, for I can neither affirm things whereof I doubt, nor suppress what I have heard. • CURT., HIST., 9

’Tis neither worth the while to affirm or to refute these things; we must stand to report. • LIVY, I.PREF AND 8.6

NOTES

- ¹ In Baldassare Castiglione's 1528 *Book of the Courtier* (*Il Cortegiano*), a rider who is overly tight and stiff is described as riding "Venetian style."

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Cic., Fin.	Cicero, <i>On Ends</i>
Cic., Off.	Cicero, <i>On Duties</i>
Claud., Eu.	Claudian, <i>Against Eutropius</i>
Curt., Hist.	Quintus Curtius Rufus, <i>Histories of Alexander the Great</i>
Erasmus, Ad.	Erasmus, <i>Adagia</i>
Hor., Carm.	Horace, <i>Odes</i>
Hor., Sat.	Horace, <i>Satires</i>
Juv.	Juvenal, <i>Satires</i>
Livy	Livy, <i>History of Rome</i>
Mart.	Martial, <i>Epigrams</i>
Ov., Tri.	Ovid, <i>Tristia</i>
Plaut., Pseud.	Plautus, <i>Pseudolus</i>
Cic., Pet.	Quintus Tullius Cicero, <i>Handbook of Electioneering</i>
Sen., Ep.	Seneca, <i>Epistles</i>
Tac., Ann.	Tacitus, <i>Annals</i>
Ter., An.	Terence, <i>Andria</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>
Verg., G.	Virgil, <i>Georgics</i>