

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 20

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Of the force of imagination

FORTIS imaginatio generat casum: *A strong imagination begetteth chance, say learned clearkes.* I am one of those that feele a very great conflict and power of imagination. All men are shockt therewith, and some overthrowne by it. The impression of it pierceth me, and for want of strength to resist hir, my endeavor is to avoide it. I could live with the only assistance of holy and mery hearted men. The sight of others anguishes doth sensibly drive me into anguish; and my sense hath often usurped the sense of a third man. If one cough continually, he provokes my lungs and throate. I am more unwilling to visite the sicke dutie dooth engage me unto, then those to whom I am little beholding, and regard least. I apprehend the evil which I studie, and place it in me. I deeme it not strange that she brings both agues and death to such as give hir scope to worke hir will, and applaude hir. *Simon Thomas* was a great Phisitian in his daies. I remember upon a time comming by chance to visit a rich old man that dwelt in *Tholouse*, and who was troubled with the cough of the lungs, who discoursing with the said *Simon Thomas* of the meanes of his recoverie, he told him, that one of the best was, to give me occasion to be delighted in his companie, and that fixing his eyes upon the livelines and freshnes of my face, and setting his thoughts upon the jolitie and vigor, wherewith my youthfull age did then flourish, and filling all his senses with my flourishing estate, his habitude might thereby be amended, and his health recovered. But he forgot to say, that mine might also be empaired and infected. *Gallus Vibius* did so well enure his minde to comprehend the essence and motions of folly, that hee so transported his judgement from out his seate, as he could never afterward bring it to his right place againe: and might rightly boast, to have become a foole through wisdom. Some there are, that through feare anticipate the hang-mans hand; as he did, whose friends having obtained his pardon, and putting away the cloth wherewith he was hood-winkt, that he might hear it read, was found starke dead upon the scaffold, wounded onely by the stroke of imagination. We sweate, we shake, we growe pale, and we blush at the motions of our imagination; and wallowing in our beds we feele our bodies agitated and turmoiled at their apprehensions, yea in such manner, as sometimes we are readie to yeeld up the spirit. And burning youth (although asleepe) is often therewith so

possessed and enfoulded, that dreaming it doth satisfie and enjoy her amorous desires.

*Vt quasi transactis sæpe omnibu' rebu' profundant
Fluminis ingentes fluctus, uestémque cruentent.*

*And if all things were done, they powre foorth streames,
And bloodie their night-garment in their dreames.*

And although it be not strange to see some men have hornes growing upon their head in one night, that had none when they went to bed: notwithstanding the fortune or successe of *Cyppus* King of *Italie* is memorable, who because the day before he had with earnest affection, assisted and beene attentive at a bul-baiting, and having all night long dreamed of hornes in his head, by the very force of imagination brought them forth the next morning in his forehead. An earnest passion gave the sonne of *Cræsus* his voice, which nature had denied him. And *Antiochus* got an ague, by the excellent beautie of *Stratonica* so deeply imprinted in his minde. *Plinie* reporteth to have seene *Lucius Cossitius* upon his marriage day to have beene transformed from a woman to a man. *Pontanus* and others recount the like Metamorphosies to have hapned in *Italie* these ages past: And through a vehement desire of him and his mother,

Vota puer soluit, quæ fœmina uouerat Iphis

*Iphis a boy, the vowes then payde,
Which he vow'd when he was a mayde.*

My selfe traveling on a time by *Vitry* in *France*, hapned to see a man, whom the Bishop of *Soissons* had in confirmation, named *Germane*, and all the inhabitants there about have both knowne and seene to be a woman-childe, untill she was two and twentie yeares of age, called by the name of *Marie*. He was, when I saw him, of good yeares, and had a long beard, and was yet unmarried. Hee saith, that upon a time leaping, and straining himselfe to over leape an other, he wot not how, but where before he was a woman, he sodainly felt the instruments of a man to come out of him; and to this day the maidens of that towne and cuntry have a song in use, by which they warne one an other, when they are leaping, not to straine themselves overmuch, or open their legs to wide, for feare they should bee turned to boyes, as *Marie Germane* was. It is no great woonder, that such accidents doe often happen, for if imagination have power in such things, it is so continually annexed, and so forcibly fastened to this subject, that least she should so often fall into the relaps of the same thought, and sharpenesse of desire, it is better one time for all, to incorporate this virile part unto wenches. Some will not sticke to ascribe the scarres of King *Dagobert*, or the cicatrices of Saint *Francis* unto the power of imagination. Othersome will say, that by the force of it, bodies are sometimes removed from their places. And *Celsus* reportes of a priest, whose soule was ravished into such an extasie, that for a long time the body remained voyde of all expiration and sense. Saint *Augustine* speaketh of an other, who if hee but heard any lamentable and wailefull cries, would sodainely fall into a swone, and bee so forcibly carried from himselfe, that did any chide and

braule never so loude, pinch and thumpe him never so much, he could not be made to stirre, untill he came to himselfe againe. Then would he say, he had heard sundry strange voyces, comming as it were from a farre, and perceiving his pinches and bruses, wondered at them. And that it was not an obstinate conceit, or wilfull humour in him, or against his feeling sense, it plainly appeared by this, because during his extasie, he seemed to have neither pulse nor breath. It is very likely that the principall credit of visions, of enchauntments, and such extraordinary effects, proceedeth from the power of imaginations, working especially in the mindes of the vulgare sort, as the weakest and seeliest, whose conceit and beliefe is so seized upon, that they imagine to see what they see not. I am yet in doubt, these pleasant bonds, wherewith our world is so fettered, and *France* so pestered, that nothing else is spoken of, are happily but the impressions of apprehension, and effects of feare. For I know by experience, that someone, for whom I may as well answer as for my selfe, and in whom no maner of suspition either of weakenesse or enchantment might fall, hearing a companion of his make reporte of an extraordinary faint sowning, wherein he was fallen, at such a time, as he least looked for it, and wrought him no small shame, whereupon the horrour of his report did so strongly strike his imagination, as he ranne the same fortune, and fell into a like drooping: And was thence forward subject to fall into like fits: So did the passionate remembrance of his inconvenience possesse and tyrannize him; but his fond doting was in time remedied by an other kinde of raving. For himselfe avowing and publishing afore hand the infirmitie he was subject unto, the contention of his soule was solaced upon this, that bearing his evill as expected, his duty thereby diminished, and he grieved lesse thereat. And when at his choice, he hath had law and power (his thought being cleered and unmasked, his body finding it selfe in his right due and place) to make the same to bee felt, seized upon, and apprehended by others knowledge: he hath fully and perfectly recovered himselfe. If a man have once beene capable, he can not afterward be incapable, except by a just and absolute weakenesse. Such a michiefe is not to be feared, but in the enterprises, where our minde is beyond all measure bent with desire and respect; and chiefly where opportunitie comes unexpected and requires a sudden dispatch. There is no meanes for a man to recover himselfe from this trouble; I know some, who have found to come unto it with their bodies as it were halfe gluttet else-where, thereby to stupifie or allay the heate of that furie, and who through age, finde themselves lesse unable, by how much more they be lesse able: And another, who hath also found good, in that a friend of his assured him to bee provided with a counter-battery of forcible enchauntments, to preserve him in any such conflict: It is not amisse I relate how it was. An Earle of very good place, with whom I was familiarly acquainted, being married to a very faire Lady, who had long beene solicited for love, by one assisting at the wedding, did greatly trouble his friends; but most of all an old Lady his kinswoman, who was chiefe at the marriage, and in whose house it was solemnized, as she that much feared such sorceries and witchcrats: which she gave mee to understand, I comforted her as well as I could, and desired her to relie upon me: I had by chance a peece of golden plate in my truncke, wherein were ingraven certaine celestiall figures, good against the sunne-beames, and for the head-ach, being fitly layde upon the suture of the head: and that it might the better be kept there, it was sewed to a

riband, to be fastened under the chinne. A fond dotting conceit, and cosin-germane to that wee now speake of. *James Peletier* had whilst he lived in my house, bestowed that singular gift upon mee; I advised my selfe to put it to some use, and tolde the Earle, he might happily be in danger, and come to some misfortune as others had done, the rather because some were present, that would not sticke to procure him some ill lucke, and which was worse, some spitefull shame; but neverthelesse I willed him boldly to goe to bed: For I would shew him the part of a true friend, and in his neede, spare not for his good to employ a miracle, which was in my power; alwayes provided, that on his honour he would promise me faithfully to keepe it very secret; which was onely, that when about mid-night he should have his candle brought him, if he had had no good successe in his businesse, hee should make such and such a signe to me. It fel out, his mind was so quailed, and his eares so dulled, that by reason of the bond wherewith the trouble of his imagination had tied him, hee could not runne on poste: and at the houre appointed, made the signe agreed upon betweene us, I came and whispered him in the eare, that under pretence to put us all out of his chamber, he should rise out of his bed, and in jesting manner take my night gowne which I had on, and put it upon himselfe (which he might well doe, because we were much of one stature) and keepe it on till he had performed my appointment, which was, that when we should bee gone out of the Chamber, he should with-draw himselfe to make water, and using certaine jestures, I had shewed him, speake such wordes thrice over. And every time he spake them he should girt the Ribbond, which I put into his handes, and very carefully place the plate thereto fastned, just upon his kidneyes, and the whole figure, in such a posture. All which when he had accordingly done, and the last time so fastened the ribbond, that it might neither be untide nor stirred from his place, he should then boldely and confidently returne to his charge, and not forget to spreade my night-gowne upon his bed, but so as it might cover them both. These fopperies are the chiefe of the effect. Our thought being unable so to free it selfe, but some strange meanes will proceed from some abstruse learning: Their inanie gives them weight and credite. To conclude, it is most certaine, my Characters proved more venerian than solare, more in action, than in prohibition. It was a ready and curious humour drew me to this effect, farre from my nature. I am an enemy to craftie and fained actions, and hate all sottletie in my handes, not onely recreative, but also profitable. If the action be not vicious, the course unto it, is facultie. *Amasis* king of *Ægypt*, tooke to wife *Laodice*, a very beauteous yong virgine of *Greece*, and he that before had in every other place found and shewed himselfe a lustie gallant, found himselfe so short, when he came to grapple with her, that he threatned to kill her, supposing it had bin some charme or sorcerie. As in all things that consist in the fantasie, she addrest him to devotion. And having made his vowes and promises to *Venus*, he found himselfe divinely freed, even from the first night of his oblations and sacrifices. Now they wrong us, to receive and admit us with their wanton, squeamish, quarellous countenances, which setting us a fire, extinguish us.

Pythagoras his neece was wont to say, *That a woman which lies with a man, ought, together with her petie-coate, leave off all bashfulnesse, and with her petie-coate, take the same againe.* The minde of the assailant molested with sundry

different alarums, is easily dismaide. And hee whom imagination hath once made to suffer this shame (and shee hath caused the same to be felt but in the first acquaintances; because they are then burning and violent, and in the first acquaintance and comming together, or triall a man gives of himselfe, he is much more afraide and quaint to misse the marke he shootes at) having begunne ill he fals into an ague or spite of this accident, which afterward continueth in succeeding occasions. Married men, because time is at their command, and they may goe to it when they list, ought never to presse or importune their enterprise, unlesse they be readie. And it is better undecentlie to faile in hanseling the nuptiall bed, full of agitation and fits, by waiting for some or other fitter occasion, and more private opportunitie, lesse sodaine and alarmed, then to fall into a perpetuall miserie, by apprehending an astonishment and desperation of the first.¹ Before possession taken, a patient ought by sallies, and divers times, lightly assay and offer himselfe without vexing or opiniating himselfe, definitively to convince himselfe. Such as knowe their members docile and tractable by nature, let them onely endeavour to counter-cosin their fantasie. Men have reason to checke the indocile libertie of this member, for so importunatelie insinuating himselfe when we have no neede of him, and so importunately, or as I may say impertinently failing, at what time wee have most neede of him; and so imperiously contesting by his authority, with our will, refusing with such fiercenes and obstinacie our solicitations both mentall and manuall. Neverthelesse if a man inasmuch as hee dooth gormandize and devour his rebellion, and drawes a triall by his condemnation, would pay me for to plead his cause, I would peradventure make other of our members to be suspected to have in envy of his importance, and sweetnesse of his use, devised this imposture, and framed this set quarrell against him, and by some malicious complot armed the world against him, enviously charging him alone with a fault common to them all. For I referre it to your thought, whether there be anie one particular part of our body, that doth not sometimes refuse hir particular operation to our will and wish, and that doth not often exercise and practise against our will. All of them have their proper passions, which without any leave of ours doe either awaken or lull them asleepe. How often doe the forced motions and changes of our faces, witnesse the secretest and most lurking thoughts we have, and bewray them to bystanders? The same cause that dooth animate this member, doth also, unwitting to us, embolden our hart, our lungs, and our pulses. The sight of a pleasing object, reflecting imperceptibly on us, the flame of a contagious or aguish emotion. Is there nought besides these muscles and veines, that rise and fall without the consent, not onely of our will, but also of our thought? We cannot commaunde our haire to stand on end, nor our skinne to startle for desire or feare. Our hands are often carried where we direct them not. Our tongue and voice are sometimes to seeke of their faculties, the one looseth her speach, the other her nimblenesse. Even when we have nothing to feede upon, wee would willingly forbid it: the appetites to eate, or list to drinke, doe not leave to moove the partes subject to them, even as this other appetite, and so, though it be out of season, forsaketh us, when he thinks good. Those instruments that serve to discharge the belly, have their proper compressions and dilations, besides our intent, and against our meaning, as these are destined to discharge the kidneis. And that which, the better to authorize our willes

power, an ancient Father alleadgeth, to have seene one, who could at all times commaund his posterior, to let as many scapes as he would, and which *Vives* endeareth by the example of an other in his dayes, who could let tunable and organized ones, following the tune of any voyce propounded unto his eares, inferreth the pure obedience of that member: than which, none is commonly more indiscreete and tumultuous. Seeing my selfe knowe one so skittish and mutinous, that these fortie yeeres keepe his maister in such awe, that will he, or nill he, hee will with a continuall breath, constant and unintermitted custome breake winde at his pleasure, and so brings him to his grave. And would to God I knewe it but by Histories, how that many times our belly, being restrained thereof, brings us even to the gates of a pining and languishing death: And that the Emperour, who gave us free leave to vent at all times, and every where, had also given us the power to doe it. But our will, by whose priviledge wee advance this reproch, how much more likelie, and consonant to trueth may wee taxe it of rebellion, and accuse it of sedition, by reason of its unrulinesse and disobedience? Will shee at all times doe that, which we would have her willingly to doe? Is she not often willing to effect that, which we forbid her to desire? and that to our manifest prejudice and damage? Doth she suffer herselfe to be directed by the conclusions of our reason? To conclude, I would urge in defence of my client, that it would please the Judges to consider, that concerning this matter, his cause being inseperably conjoynded to a consort, and indistinctly: yet will not a man addresse himselfe but to him, both by the arguments and charges, which can no way appertaine to his said consort. For, his effect is indeede sometime importunately to invite, but to refuse never: and also to invite silently and quietly. Therefore is the sawcinesse and illegalitie of the accusers seene. Howsoever it be, protesting that advocates and judges may wrangle, contend, and give sentence, what, and how they please, Nature will in the meane time follow her course: who, had she endewed this member with any particular priviledge, yet had she done but right, and shewed but reason. Author of the onely immortall woorke, of mortall men. Divine woorke according to *Socrates*; and love, desire of immortalitie, and immortall *Demon* himselfe. Some man peradventure, by the effects of imagination, leaveth the pox or Kings evill here, which his companion carrieth into *Spaine* againe: loe here why in such cases men are accustomed to require a prepared minde, wherefore do Phisitians labour and practise before hand the conceite and credance of their patients, with so many false promises of their recovery and health, unlesse it be that the effect of imagination may supple and prepare the imposture of their impostume?² They knew that one of their trades-maister hath left written, how some men have beene found, in whom the onely sight of a potion hath wrought his due operation: All which humor or caprice is now come into my mind, upon the report which an Apothecarie, whilome a servant in my fathers house, was wont to tell me, a man by knowledge simple, and by birth a Switzer; a nation little vaine-glorious, and not much given to lying, which was, that for a long time he had knowne a marchant in *Tholouse*, sickish, and much troubled with the stone, and who often had neede of glisters, who according to the fits and occurrences of his evill, caused them diversly to be prescribed by Phisitians. Which being brought him, no accustomed forme to them belonging was omitted, and would often taste whether they were too hote, and view them well, and lying along upon his bedde, on his

bellie, and all complements performed, only injection excepted, which ceremonie ended, the Apothecary gone, and the patient lying in his bed, even as if he had received a glister indeede, he found and felt the very same effect, which they doe that have effectually taken them. And if the Physitian saw it had not wrought sufficiently, hee would accordingly give him two or three more in the same manner. My witsnesse protesteth, that the sicke mans wife, to save charges (for he paide for them as if he had received them) having sometimes assaid to make them only with luke warme water, the effect discovered the craft, and being found not to worke at all, they were forced to returne to the former, and use the Apothecarie. A woman supposing to have swallowed a pinne with her breade, cryed and vexed hir selfe, even as if she had felt an intolerable paine in her throat, where she imagined the same to sticke; but because there appeared neither swelling or alteration, a skilfull man deeming it to be but a fantasie conceived or opinion, apprehended by eating of some pretty piece of bread, which happily might pricke hir in the swallow, made hir to vomite, and unknowne to hir, cast a pinne in that which she had vomitted. Which the woman perceiving, and imagining she had cast the same, was presently eased of hir paine. I have knowne a Gentleman, who having feasted a company of very honest Gentlemen and Gentlewomen, in his owne house, by way of sport, and in jeast, boasted two or three daies after (for there was no such thing) that he had made them eate of a baked Catte; whereat the Gentlewoman of the company apprehended such horror, that falling into a violent ague and distemper of hir stomacke, shee could by no meanes bee recovered. Even brute beastes, as well as wee, are seene to be subject to the power of imagination; witsnesse some Dogges, who for sorrow of their Maisters death are seene to die, and whome we ordinarily see to startle and barke in their sleep, and horses to neigh and struggle. But all this may be referred to the narrow suture of the Spirite and the body, entercommunicating their fortunes one unto another. It is another thing, that imagination doth sometimes worke, not onely against hir owne body, but also against that of others. And even as one body rejecteth a disease to his neighbour, as doth evidently appeare by the plague, pox, or sore eyes, that goe from one to another.

*Dum spectant oculi læsos, læduntur & ipsi:
Multaque corporibus transitione nocent.*

*Eyes become sore, while they looke on sore eyes:
By passage many ills our limmes surprise.*

Likewise the imagination moved and tossed by some vehemence, doth cast some dartes, that may offend a strange object. Antiquitie hath held, that certaine women of *Scithia*, being provoked and vexed against some men, had the power to kill them, onely with their looke. The Tortoises and the Estriges hatch their egges with their lookes onely, a signe that they have some ejacular vertue. And concerning Witches they are saide to have offensive and harme-working eyes.

Nescio quis teneros oculus mihi fascinat agnos.

*My tender Lambs I cannot see,
By what bad eye, bewitched be.*

Magicians are but ill respondents for me. So it is, that by experience we see women to transferre divers markes of their fantasies, unto children they beare in their wombes; witnes she that brought forth a Black-a-more. There was also presented unto *Charles* king of *Bohemia*, an Emperour, a young girle, borne about *Pisa*, all shagd and hairy over and over, which hir mother saide, to have beene conceived so, by reason of an image of Saint *John Baptist*, that was so painted, and hung over hir bed. That the like is in beasts, is witnessed by *Jacobs* sheepe, and also by partridges and hares, that grow white by the snowe upon mountains. There was lately seene a cat about my owne house, so earnestly eyeing a bird, sitting upon a tree, that he seeing the Cat, they both so wistly fixed their looks one upon another, so long, that at last, the bird fell downe as dead in the Cats pawes, either drunken by his owne strong imagination, or drawne by some attractive power of the Cat. Those that love hawking, have happily heard the Falkners tale, who earnestly fixing his sight upon a Kite in the aire, laide a wager that with the onely force of his looke, he would make it come stooping downe to the ground, and as some report did it many times. The histories I borrow, I referre to the consciences of those I take them from. The discourses are mine, and holde together by the prooffe of reason, not of experiences: each man may adde his example to them: and who hath none, considering the number and varietie of accidents, let him not leave to thinke, there are store of them. If I come not well for my selfe, let another come for me. So in the studie wherein I treat of our manners and motions, the fabulous testimonies, alwaies provided they be likely and possible, may serve to the purpose, as well as the true, whether it hapned or no, be it at *Rome*, or at *Paris*, to *John* or *Peter*, it is alwaies a tricke of humane capacitie, of which I am profitably advised by this reporte. I see it and reape profit by it, as well in shadowe as in body. And in divers lessons that often histories affoord, I commonly make use of that, which is most rare and memorable. Some writers there are, whose ende is but to relate the events. Mine, if I could attaine to it, should be to declare, what may come to passe, touching the same. It is justly allowed in schooles, to suppose similitudes, when they have none. Yet do not I so, and concerning that point, in superstitious religion, I exceed all historicall credit. To the examples I here set down, of what I have read, heard, done, or seene, I have sorbid my selfe so much as to dare to change the least, or alter the idlest circumstances. My conscience doth not falsifie the least opinion,³ that it may well become a divine, a Philosopher, or other men of exquisite conscience, and exact wisdome, to write histories. How can they otherwise engage their credite upon a popular reputation? How can they answer for the thoughts of unknowne persons? And make their bare conjectures passe for currant paiment? Of the actions of divers members, acted in their presence, they would refuse to beare witnes of them, if by a judge they were put to their corporall oath. And there is no man so familiarly knowne to them, of whose inward intention they would undertake to answer at full. I hold it lesse hazardous to write of things past, then present; forasmuch as the writer is not bound to give accompt but of a borrowed trueth. Some perswade me to write the affaires of my time, imagining, I can see them with a sight lesse blinded with passion, then other men, and perhaps nearer, by reason of the accesse which fortune hath given me to the chiefest

of divers factions. But they will not say, how for the glorie of *Salust*, I would not take the paines; as one that am a vowed enemie to observance, to assiduitie, and to constancie, and that there is nothing so contrarie to my stile, as a continued narration. I doe so often for want of breath breake off and interrupt my selfe. I have neither composition nor explication of any worth. I am as ignorant as a childe of the phrases and vowels belonging to common things. And therefore have I attempted to say what I can, accommodating the matter to my power. Should I take any man for a guide, my nature might differ from his. For, my libertie being so farre, I might happily publish judgements, agreeing with me, and consonant to reason, yet unlawfull and punishable. *Plutarke* would peradventure tell us of that which he hath written, that it is the worke of others, that his examples are in all and everiewhere true, that they are profitable to posteritie, and presented with a lustre, that lights and directs us unto vertue, and that is his worke. It is not dangerous, as in a medicinable drugge, whether in an old tale or report, it be thus or thus, so or so.

NOTES

- 1 The word “refusal,” restored in subsequent editions, is missing here.
- 2 Florio later used “decoction” instead of “impostume” (an archaic word for an abscess). Montaigne had “aposéme,” a purgative.
- 3 Later editions have “... falsifie the least iot. I wot not whether my insight doth. Concerning this subject I doe sometimes enter into conceit, that it may well ...”