

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 38

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Of Solitarinesse

LET-US leave aparte this out-worne comparison, betweene a solitarie and an active life: And touching that goodly saying, under which ambition and avarice shrowd themselves; that we are not borne for our particular, but for the publike good: Let-us boldly referre our selves to those that are engaged; and let them beate their conscience, if on the contrary, the states, the charges, and this trash of the world, are not rather sought and sued for to draw a private commoditie from the publike. The bad and indirect meanes wherethrough in our age men canvase and toyle to attaine the same, doe manifestly declare the end thereof to be of no great consequence. Let-us answer ambition, that her selfe gives-us the taste of solitarinesse. For, what doth she shunne so much as company? What seeketh shee more then elbow-roome? There is no place, but there are meanes and ways to doe well or ill: Neverthelesse if the saying of *Bias* be true; *That the worst parte is the greatest*: Or that which *Ecclesiastes* saith, *That of a thousand there is not one good*.

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

*Good men are rare, so many scarce (I feare)
As gates of Thebes, mouths of rich Nilus were.*

Contagion is very dangerous in a throng. A man must imitate the vicious, or hate them: Both are dangerous; for to resemble them is perilous, because they are many, and to hate many is hazardous, because they are dissemblable. And Marchants that travell by sea, have reason to take heede, that those which goe in the same ship, be not dissolute, blasphemers, and wicked; judging such companie unfortunate. Therefore *Bias* said pleasantly to those, that together with him passt the danger of a great storme, and called to the Gods, for helpe: *Peace my maisters, lest they should heare, that you are here with me*. And of a more militarie example, *Albuquerque* Viceroy in *India* for *Emanuel* King of *Portugall*, in an extreame danger of a seatempest, tooke a yong boy upon his shoulders, for this onely end, that in the common perill his innocencie might be his warrant,

and recommending to Gods favour, to set him on shore. Yet may a wise man live every where contented, yea and alone, in the throng of a Pallace: but if he may chuse, he will (saith he) *Avoyde the sight of it*. If neede require, hee will endure the first: but if he may have his choyse, he will chuse the latter. He thinkes hee hath not sufficiently rid himselfe from vices, if he must also contest with other mens faults. *Charondas* punished those for wicked, that were convicted to have frequented lewd companies. There is nothing so dis-sociable and sociable as man: the one for his vice, the other for his nature. And I thinke *Antisthenes* did not satisfie him, that upbraided him with his conversation with the wicked, saying, *That Physitians live amongst the sicke*. Who if they steede sicke-mens healths; they empaire their owne, by the infection, continuall visiting, touching and frequenting of diseases. Now (as I suppose) the end is both one, thereby to live more at leasure, and better at ease. But man doth not alwayes seeke the best way to come unto it, who often supposeth to have quit affaires, when he hath but changed them. There is not much lesse vexation in the government of a private familie, then in the managing of an entire state: wheresoever the minde is busied, there it is al. And though domestical occupations be lesse important, they are as importunate. Moreover, though we have freed our selves from the court, and from the market, we are not free from the principall torments of our life.

*ratio & prudentia curas,
Non locus effusi latè maris arbiter aufert.*

*Reason and wisdom may set cares aside,
Not place the Arbiter of seas so wide.*

Shift we, or change we places never so often, ambition, avarice, irresolution, feare, and concupiscences never leave-us.

Et post equitem sedet atra cura.

*Care looking grim and blacke, doth sit
Behinde his backe that rides from it.*

They often follow us, even into immured cloisters, and into schooles of Philosophie; nor doe hollow rocks, nor wearing of haire-shirts, nor continuall fastings rid us from them.

hæret lateri, lethalis arundo.

*The shaft that death implide
Sticks by the flying side.*

It was told *Socrates*, that one was no whit amended by his travell: *I beleeve it well* (saide he) *for he carried himselfe with him.*

*Quid terras alio calentes
Sole mutamus? patria quis exul
Se quoque fugit?*

*Why change we soyles warm'd with another Sunne?
Who from whom banisht hath him selfe out-runne?*

If a man doe not first discharge both himselfe and his minde from the burthen that presseth her, removing from place to place will stirre and presse her the more; as in a ship, wares well stowed, and closely piled, take up least roome, you doe a sicke-man more hurt then good, to make him change place, you settle an evill in removing the same; as stakes or poles, the more they are stirred and shaken, the faster they sticke, and sinke deeper into the ground. Therefore is it not enough, for a man to have sequestred himselfe from the concourse of people: it is not sufficient to shift place, a man must also sever him-selfe from the popular conditions, that are in us. A man must sequester and recover himselfe from himselfe.

*rupi iam uincola, dicas,
Nam luctata canis nodum arripit, attamen illa
Cum fugit, à collo trahitur pars longa catenæ.*

*You will say haply I my bonds have quit,
Why so the striving dog the knot hath bit;
Yet when he flies, much chaine doth follow it.*

We carry our fetters with us: is it not an absolute libertie; we still cast backe our lookes towards that we have left behinde: our minde doth still runne on it; our fansie is full of it.

*nisi purgatum est pectus, quæ prælia nobis
Atque pericula tunc ingratis insinuandum?
Quantæ conscindunt hominem cupidinis acres
Sollicitum curæ, quantique perinde timores?
Quidue superbia, spurcitia, ac petulantia, quantas
Efficiunt clades, quid luxus desidiésque?*

*Unlesse our breast be purg'd, what warres must wee,
What perills then, though much displeas'd, see?
How great feares, how great cares of sharpe desire
Doe carefull man distract, torment, enfire?
Uncleanenesse, wantonnesse, slouth, riot, pride,
How great calamities have these implide?*

Our evill is rooted in our minde: and it cannot scape from-it-selfe.

In culpa est animus, qui se non effugit unquam,

*The minde in greatest fault must lie,
Which from it selfe can never flie,*

Therefore must-it be reduced and brought into it selfe: It is the true solitarinesse, and which may be enjoyed even in the frequence of peopled Citties, and Kings courtes: but it is more commodiously enjoyed aparte. Now sithence wee undertake to live solitarie, and without companie, let-us cause our contentment to depend from our selves: Let-us shake off all

bondes, that tie us unto others: Gaine-we that victorie over-us, that in good earnest we may live solitarie, and therein live at our ease. *Stilpon* having escaped the combustion of his Cittie, wherein he had lost, both wife, and children, and all his goods; *Demetrius Poliorcetes* seeing him in so great a ruine of his COUNTRY, with an un-affrighted countenance, demaunded of him, whether he had received anie losse; *He answered, No: and that (thanks given to God) he had lost nothing of his own.* It is that, which *Antisthenes* the Philosopher said very pleasantly; *That man ought to provide himselfe with munitions, that might floate upon the water, and by swimming escape the danger of shipwarcke with him.* Verily, a man of understanding hath lost nothing, if he yet have himselfe. When the Cittie of *Nola* was over-run by the Barbarians, *Paulinus* Bishop thereof, having lost all he had there, and being their prisoner, prayed thus unto God: *Oh Lord deliver me from feeling of this losse: for thou knowest as yet they have toucht nothing that is mine.* The riches that made him rich, and the goods which made him good, were yet absolutely whole. Beholde what it is to chuse treasures well, that may bee freed from injurie; and to hide them in a place, where no man may enter, and which can not bee betrayed but by our selves. A man that is able, may have wives, children, goods, and chiefly health, but not so tie himselfe unto them, that his felicitie depend on them. Wee should reserve a store-house for our selves, what neede soever chaunce; altogether ours, and wholly free, wherein wee may hoarde-up, and establish our true libertie, and principal retraite and solitarines, wherein wee must go alone to our selves, take out ordinarie entertainment, and so privatelie, that no acquaintance or communication of any strange thing may therein find place: there to discourse, to meditate and laugh, as, without wife, without children, and goods, without traine, or servants; that if by any occasion they be lost, it seeme not strange to us to passe it over; we have a mind moving and turning in it selfe; it may keepe it selfe companie; it hath wherewith to offend and defend, wherewith to receive, and wherewith to give. Let us not feare that we shal faint and droop through tedious and mind-tyring idlenes in this solitarinesse.

In solis sis tibi turba locis.

*Be thou, when with thee is not any,
As good unto thy selfe as manie.*

Virtue is contented with it selfe, without discipline, without words, and without effects. In our accustomed actions, of a thousand ther is not one found that regards us: he whom thou seest so furiously, and as it were besides himselfe, to clamber or crawle up the citie wals, or breach, as a point-blank to a whole volie of shot, and another all wounded and skarred, crazed and faint, and wel-nie hungar-starven, resolved rather to die, then to open his enemy the gate, and give him entrance; doost thou thinke he is there for himselfe? No verilie, It is peradventure for such a one, whome neither hee, nor so many of his fellowes ever saw, and who haply takes no care at all for them; but is there-whilst wallowing up to the eares in sensualitie, slouth, and al maner of carnall delights. This man whom about mid-night, when others take their rest, thou seest come out of his studie meagre-looking, with eyes-trilling, fleugmatike, squalide, and spauling, doost thou thinke, that plodding on his bookes he doth seek how he shal

become an honest man; or more wise, or more content? There is no such matter. Hee will either die in his pursuite, or teach posterity the measure of *Plautus* verses, and the true Orthography of a Latine worde. Who doth not willingly choppe and counterchange his health, his ease, yea, and his life for glory, and for reputation? The most unprofitable, vaine, and counterfet coine, that is in use with us. Our death is not sufficient to make us afraide, let us also charge our selves with that of our wives, of our children, and of our friends, and people. Our owne affaires doe not sufficiently trouble and vex us; Let us also drudge, toile, vex, and torment our selves with our neighbours and friends matters.

*Uah quemquámne hominem in animum instituere, aut
Parare, quod sit charius, quám ipse est sibi?*

*Fie, that a man should cast, that aught, then hee
Himselfe of himselfe more belov'd should bee.*

Solitarinesse mee seemeth hath more apparence and reason in those which have given their most active and flourishing age unto the world, in imitation of *Thales*. We have lived long inough for others, live we the remainder of our life unto our selves: let us bring home our cogitations and inventions unto our selves, and unto our ease. It is no easie matter to make a safe retireite: it dooth over-much trouble us with joyning other enterprises unto-it. Since God gives us leasure to dispose of our dislodging. Let us prepare our selves unto it, packe wee up our baggage. Let us betimes bid our companie farewell. Shake wee off these violent hold-fasts, which else-where engage us, and estrange us from our selves. These so strong bonds must be untied, and a man may est-soones love this or that, but wedde nothing but himselfe, That is to say, let the rest be our owne: yet not so combined and glued together, that it may not be sundred, without fleaing-us, and therewithall, pull away some piece of our owne. The greatest thing of the world, is for a man to know how to be his owne. It is high time to shake-off societie, since we can bring nothing to-it. And he that can not lend, let him take heede of borrowing. Our forces faile-us: retire we them, and shut them up into our selves. He that can suppress and confound in himselfe the offices of so many amities, and of the company, let him doe-it. In this fall, which makes us, inutile, irksome, and importunate to others; let him take heede he be not importunate, irksome, and unprofitable to himselfe. Let him flatter, court and cherish himselfe, and above all, let him governe himselfe, respecting his reason, and fearing his conscience, so that he may not without shame stumble or trip in their presence. *Rarum est enim, ut satis se quisque uereatur. For it is a rare matter, that every man sufficiently should stand in awe and reverence of himselfe. Socrates saith, that yong men ought to be instructed, and men exercised in wel-doing; and old men withdraw themselves from all civill and militarie negotiations, living at their owne discretion, without obligation to any certaine office.* There are some complexions, more proper for these precepts of retreat than others. Those which have a tender and demisse apprehension, a squeamish affection, a delicate will, and which can not easily subject or employ it selfe (of which both by naturall condition and propense discourse, I am one) will better apply themselves unto this counsell, then active minds, and busie spirits; which embrace all, every where engage, and in all things passionate

themselves; that offer, that present, and yeeld themselves to all occasions. A man must make use of all these accidentall commodities, and which are without us, so long as they be pleasing to us; but not make them our principall foundation: It is not so, nor reason, nor nature permit-it. Why should we against their lawes subject our contentment to the power of others? Moreover, to anticipate the accidents of fortune; for a man to deprive himselfe of the commodities he hath in possession, as many have done for devotion, and some Philosophers by discourse; to serve themselves, to lie upon the hard ground, to pull out their owne eyes, to cast their riches into the sea, to seeke for paine and smart (some by tormenting this life, for the happinesse of another; othersome placing themselves on the lowest step, thereby to warrant themselves from a new fall) is the action of an excessive vertue. Let sterner and more vigorous complexions make their lurking glorious and exemplar.

*tuta & paruula laudo,
Cùm res deficiunt, satis inter uilia fortis:
Verùm ubi quid melius contingit & unctius, idem
Hos sapere, & solos aio benè uiuere, quorum
Conspicitur nitidis fundata pecunia uillis.*

*When riches faile, I praise the safe estate,
Though small; base things doe not high thoughts abate.
But when t'is better, finer with me, I,
They onely live wel, and are wise, doe cry,
Whose coine in faire farmes doth well-grounded lie.*

There is worke enough for me to doe without going so farre. It sufficeth me under fortunes favour, to prepare my selfe for her disfavour; and being at ease, as farre as imagination may attaine unto, to represent the euill to come unto my selfe: Even as wee enure our selves to tilts and tourneyes, and counterfeit warre in time of peace. I esteeme not *Arcesilaus* the Philosopher lesse reformed, because I know him to have used household implements of gold and silver, according as the condition of his fortune gave him leave, I rather value him the more, then if he had not done-it, forsomuch as hee both moderately and liberally made use of them. I know unto what limites naturall necessitie goeth; and I consider the poore almes-man begging at my dore, to be often more plumb-checkt, in better health and liking then I am: Then doe I enter into his estate, and assay to frame and sute my mind unto his byase. And so over-running other examples, albeit I imagine death, povertie, contempt, and sicknesse to bee at my heeles, I easily resolve my selfe, not to apprehend any feare of that, which one of lesse worth then my selfe doth tolerate and undergoe with such patience: And I can not beleeeve, that the basenesse or shallownesse of understanding, can doe more then vigor and farre-seeing, or that the effects and reason of discretion, can not reach to the effects of custome and use. And knowing what slender hold-fast these accessorie commodities have, I omit not in full jouyssance of them, humbly to beseech God of his mercie (as a soveraigne request) to make me contented with my selfe, and with the goods proceeding from me. I see some gallantly-disposed yong men, who notwithstanding their faire-seeming shew, have many boxes-full of pils in their coffers at home, to take when

the rheume shall assaile them; which so much the lesse they feare, when they thinke the remedy to be at hand. So must a man doe: as also if he feele himselfe subject to some greater infirmitie, to store himselfe with medicaments that may asswage, supple, and stupifie the parte grieved. The occupation a man should chuse for such a life, must neither be painefull nor tedious, otherwise, in vaine should we accompt to have sought our abiding there, which depends from the particular taste of every man. Mine doth no way accommodate it selfe to husbandry. Those that love it, must with moderation apply themselves unto-it.

Conentur sibi res, non se submittere rebus.

*Endevour they things to them to submit,
Not them to things (if they have Horace wit)*

Husbandry is otherwise a servile office, as *Salust* termeth it: It hath more excusable parts, as the care of gardening, which *Xenophon* ascribeth to *Cyrus*: A meane or mediocritie may be found, betweene this base and vile carking care, extended and full of toiling labor, which we see in men that wholly plunge themselves therein, and that profound and extreame retchlesnesse to let all things goe at six and seaven, which is seene in others.

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

*Cattle destroyde Democritus -his sets,
While his mind bodillesse vagaries fets.*

But let-us heare the counsell, which *Plinie* the yonger giveth to his friend *Cornelius Rufus*, touching this point of Solitarinesse: *I perswade thee in this full-gorged and fat retraite, wherein thou art, to remit this base and abject care of husbandrie unto thy servants, and give thy selfe to the studie of letters, whence thou maist gather something, that may altogether be thine owne.* He meaneth reputation: like unto *Ciceroes* humor, who saith, *That he will imploy his solitarinesse and residence from publike affaires, to purchase unto himselfe by his writings an immortal life.*

*usque adeóne
Scire tuum nihil est, nisi te scire hoc sciat alter?*

*Is it then nothing-worth that thou doost know,
Unlesse what thou doost know, thou others show?*

It seemeth to be reason, when a man speaketh to withdraw himselfe from the world, that one should looke beyond him. These doe-it but by halves. Indeede they set their match against the time they shall be no more: but pretend to reape the fruit of their dessignes, when they shall be absent from the world, by a ridiculous contradiction. The imagination of those, who through devotion seeke solitarinesse, filling their mindes with the certaintie of heavenly promises, in the other life, is much more soundly consorted. They propose God as an object infinite in goodness, and incomprehensible in power, unto themselves. The soule hath therein, in all

free libertie, wherewith to glut her-selfe. Afflictions and sorrowes, redound to their profite, beeing employed for the purchase and attaining of health and eternall gladnesse. Death, according to ones wish, is a passage to so perfect an estate. The sharpnesse of their rules, is presently made smoothe and easie by custome; and carnall concupiscences, rejected, abated, and lulled asleepe by refusing them; for nothing entertaineth them but use and exercise. *This onely end of another life, blessedly immortall, doth rightly merite we should abandon the pleasures and commodities of this our life. And he that can enlighten his soule with the flame of a lively faith and hope, really and constantly, in his solitarinesse, doth build unto himselfe a voluptuous and delicious life, far surmounting all other lives.* Therefore doth neither the end nor middle of this counsell please me. We are ever falling into a relaps, from an ague to a burning feaver. This plodding occupation of bookes, is as painfull as any other, and as great an enemy unto health, which ought principally to be considered. And a man should not suffer himselfe to be enveagled by the pleasure he takes in them: It is the same pleasure, that looseth the thriving husband-man, the greedy-covetous, the sinning-voluptuous, and the puft-up ambitious. The wisest men teach us sufficiently to beware and shield-us from the treasons of our appetites, and to discern true and perfect pleasures, from delights blended and entermingled with more paine. For, most pleasures, (say they) tickle, fawne upon, and embrace-us, with purpose to strangle-us, as did the theeves whom the Egyptians termed *Philistas*: And if the head-ach would seize upon us before drunkennesse, we would then beware of too much drinking: but sensualitie the better to entrap-us, marcheth before, and hideth her tracke from-us. Bookes are delightfull; but if by continuall frequenting them, we in the end loose both health and cheerefulness (our best partes) let us leave them. I am one of those who thinke their fruite can no way countervaille this losse. As men that have long time felt themselves enfeebled through some indisposition, doe in the end yeeld to the mercie of physicke, and by arte have certaine rules of life prescribed them, which they will not transgresse: So he that withdrawes himselfe, as distasted and over-tired with the common life, ought likewise to frame and prescribe this unto the rules of reason; direct and range the same by premeditation, and discourse. He must bid all manner of travell farewell, what shew soever it beare; and in generall shunne all passions that any way impeach the tranquillitie of minde and body, and follow the course best agreeing with his humour.

Vnusquisque sua nouerit ire uia.

*His owne way every man
Treade-out directly can.*

A man must give to thriving-husbandrie, to laborious studie, to toylesome hunting, and to every other exercise, the utmost boundes of pleasure; and beware he engage himselfe no further, if once paine begin to entermeddle it selfe with it; we should reserve busines and negotiations, onely for so much as is behoofefull to keepe us in breath, and to warrant us from the inconveniences which the other extremitie of a base, faint-harted idlenes drawes after it. There are certaine barren and thornie sciences, which for the most part are forged for the multitude: they should be left for those,

who are for the service of the world. As for my selfe, I love no bookes, but such as are pleasant, and easie, and which tickle me, or such as comfort and counsell me, to direct my life and death.

*tacium sylvas inter reptare salubres
Curantem quidquid dignum sapiente bonoque est.*

*Silently creeping midst the wholesome wood
With care what's for a wise-man and a good.*

The wiser sorte of men, having a strong and vigorous minde may frame unto themselves an altogether spirituall life. But mine being common, I must helpe to upholde my selfe by corporall commodities: And age having estsoones dispoiled me of those that were most sutable to my fantasie. I instruct and sharpen my appetite to those remaining, most sortable this other season. We must tooth-and-naile retaine the use of this lives pleasures, which our yeares snatch from us, one after another:

*Carpamus dulcia, nostrum est,
Quod uiuis, cinis & manes & fabula fiet.*

*Plucke we sweete pleasures: we thy life give thee.
Thou shalt a tale, a ghost, and ashes be.*

Now concerning the end of glorie, which *Plinie*, and *Cicero* propose unto-us, it is farre from my discourse: The most opposit humor to solitarie retiring, is ambition. *Glory and rest, are things, that cannot squat in one same forme:* as farre as I see, these have nought but their armes and legges out of the throng, their minde and intent is further and more engaged in them then ever it was.

Tun' uetule auriculis alienis colligis escas?

*Gatherst thou dotard at these yeares,
Fresh baites, fine foode, for others eares?*

They have gone-backe that they might leape the better, and with a stronger motion make a nimbler offer amidst the multitude. Will you see how they shoot-short by a cornes breadth? let us but counterpoise the advise of two Philosophers, and of two most different sects: The one writing to *Idomeneus*, the other to *Lucilius* their friends, to divert them from the managing of affaires and greatnes, unto a solitarie kinde of life. *You have (say they) lived hitherto swimming and floating adrift, come and die in the haven; you have given the past of your life unto light, give the remainder unto darknesse. It is impossible to give-over occupations, if you doe not also give-over the fruites of them: Therefore cleare your selfe from all care and glorie. There is great danger, lest the glittering of your fore-passed actions should over-much dazle you, yea and follow you even to your denne. Together with other concupiscences, shake off that which commeth from the approbation of others. And touching your knowledge and sufficiencie, take you no care of them they will loose no whit of their effect; if your selfe be any thing the better for them. Remember but him, who being demanded, to what purpose he toyled so much about an Art, which could by no meanes come to the knowledge of many: Few are*

enow for me; one will suffice, yea lesse than one will content me, answered he. He said true: you and another are a sufficient theatre one for another; or you to your selfe alone. Let the people be one unto you, and one be all the people to you: It is a base ambition to goe about to draw glorie from ones idlenes, and from ones lurking-hole. A man must doe as some wilde beasts, which at the entrance of their caves, will have no manner of footing seene. You must no longer seeke what the world saieth of you, but how you must speake unto your-selfe: withdraw your selfe into your selfe; but first prepare your selfe to receive your selfe: it were folly to trust to your selfe, if you cannot governe your selfe. A man may as well faile in solitarines, as in companie, there are waies for-it, untill such time as you have framed your selfe such, that you dare not halte before your selfe, and that you shal be ashamed-of, and beare a kind of respect unto your selfe. *Obseruentur species honestæ animo: Let honest Ideaes still represent themselves before your minde:* Ever present *Cato, Phocion, and Aristides* unto your imagination, in whose presence even fooles would hide their faults, and establish them as controulers of all your intentions. If they be disordered and untuned, their reverence will order and tune them againe: they will containe you in a way, to be contented with your selfe; to borrow nothing but from your selfe, to settle and stay your minde in assured and limited cogitations, wherein it may best please it selfe, and having gotten knowledge of true felicities, which according to the measure a man understands them, he shall accordingly injoy, and with them rest satisfied, without wishing a further continuance, either of life or name. Loe here the counsell of trulie-pure, and purely-true philosophie, not of a vaine-glorious, boasting, and prating philosophie, as is that of the two first.