

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 50

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Of Democritus and Heraclitus

JUDGEMENT is an instrument for all subjects, and medleth every where. And therefore in the Essayes I make of it, there is no maner of occasion, I seeke not to employ therein. If it be a subject I understand not my selfe, therein I make triall of it, sounding afarre off the depth of the ford, and finding the same over deepe for my reach, I keepe my selfe on the shoare. And to acknowledge not to be able to wade through, is a part of it's effect, yea of such whereof he wanteth most. If I light upon a vaine and idle subject, I assay to trie, and endeavor to see, whether I may finde a good ground to worke upon, and matter to frame a body, and wherewith to builde and under-lay-it. Sometimes I addresse my judgement and contrive-it to a noble and out-worne subject, wherein is nothing found subsisting of it selfe, the high way to it, being so bare-trodden, that it cannot march, but in other steps. There he pleaseth himself in chusing the course he thinkes best, and a thousand paths sometimes he saith, this or that was best chosen. I take my first Argument of fortune: All are alike unto me: And I never purpose to handle them thoroughly: For, there is nothing wherein I can perceive the full perfection: Which they doe not that promise to shew it-us. Of a hundred partes and visages that everie thing hath, I take one, which sometimes I slightly runne-over, and other times but cursorily glance-at. And yet other whilst I pinch it to the quicke. And give it a *Stockado*, not the widest, but the deepest I can. And for the most part I love to seize upon them by some unwonted lustre. I would adventure to treat and discourse of some matter to the depth; knew I my selfe lesse, or where I deceived in mine owne impuissance; Scattering here one and there another worde: Scantlings taken from their maine ground-worke, disorderly dispersed, without any well-grounded designe and promise. I am not bound to make it good, nor without varying to keepe my selfe close-tied unto-it; whensoever it shall please mee, to yeeld my selfe to doubt, to uncertaintie, and to my Mistris forme, which is ignorance. Each motion sheweth and discovereth what we are. The very same minde of *Cæsar*, we see in directing, marshalling, and setting the battel of *Pharsalia*, is likewise seene to order, dispose, and contrive, idle, trifling and amorous devises. We judge of a horse, not onely by seeing him ridden, and cunningly managed, but also by seeing him trot, or pace; yea, if we but looke upon him as he stands in the stable. Amongst the functions of the soule, some are but meane and base. He

that seeth hir no further, can never know hir thorowly. And he that seeth hir march hir naturall and simple pace, doth peradventure observe hir best. The winds of passions take hir most in her highest pitch, seeing she entirely coucheth hirselfe upon every matter, and wholly therein exerciseth hirselfe: and handleth but one at once; not according to-it, but according to hirselfe. Things severall in themselves have peradventure, weight, measure, and condition: But inwardly, in us, she cuttes-it out for them, as she understandeth the same hirselfe. Death is fearefull and ugly unto *Cicero*; wished-for and desired of *Cato*: and indifferent unto *Socrates*. Health, well-fare, conscience, authoritie, riches, glorie, beauty, and their contraries are dispoyled at the entrance, and receive a new vesture at the soules hand. Yea, and what coulour she pleaseth; browne, bright, greene, sadde, or any hew else: sharpe or sweet, deepe, or superficial, and what each of them pleaseth. For, none of them did ever verifie their stiles, their rules, or formes in common; each one severally is a Queene in hir owne estate. Therefore let us take no more excuses from externall qualites of things. To us it belongeth to give our selves accoumpt of it. Our good, and our evill hath no dependancy, but from our selves. Let us offer our vowes and offerings unto it; and not to fortune. She hath no power over our maners. Why shall I not judge of *Alexander*, as I am sitting and drinking at Table, and talking in good company? Or if hee were playing at Chesse, what string of his witte doth not touch or harpe on this fond-childish, and time-consuming play? I lothe and shunne-it, only because there is not sport inough in it, and that in his recreation, he is over serious with us, being ashamed I must apply that attention therunto, as might be employed on some good subject. He was no more busied in levying his forces and preparing for his glorious passage into *India*; nor this other in disentangling and discovering of a passage, whence dependeth the welfare and safety of mankind. See how much our mind troubleth this ridiculous ammuizing, if all hir sinnewes bandy not. How amply she giveth every one Law in that, to know and directly to judge of hirselfe. I do not more universally view and feele my selfe in any other posture. What passion doth not exercise us therunto? Choller, spight, hatred, impatience, and vehement ambition to overcome, in a matter wherein it were haply more excusable to be ambitious for to be vanquished. For, a rare pre-excellency, and beyond the common reach, in so frivolous a thing, is much mis-seeming a man of honour. What I say of this example, may be spoken of all others. Everie parcell, every occupation of a man, accuseth, and sheweth him equal unto another. *Democritus* and *Heraclitus* were two Philosophers, the first of which, finding and deeming humane condition to be vaine and ridiculous, did never walke abroad, but with a laughing, scornful and mocking countenance: Whereas *Heraclitus* taking pitie and compassion of the very same condition of ours, was continuallie seene with a sadde, mournfull, and heavy cheere, and with teares trickling downe his blubbered eyes.

Alter

*Ridebat quoties à limine mouerat unum
Protulerátque pedem, flebat contrarius alter.*

*One from his dore, his foote no sooner past,
But straight he laught; the other wept as fast.*

I like the first humour best, not because it is more pleasing to laugh, then to weepe; but for it is more disdainfull, and doth more condemne us then the other. And me thinkes we can never bee sufficiently despised, according to our merite. Bewailing and commiseration, are commixed with some estimation of the thing moaned and wailed. Things scorned and contemned, are thought to be of no worth. I cannot be perswaded, there can be so much ill lucke in us, as there is apparant vanitie, nor so much malice, as sottishnesse. We are not so full of evill, as of voydnesse and inanitie. We are not so miserable, as base and abject. Even so *Diogenes*, who did nothing but triffle, toy, and dally with himself, in rumberling and rowling of his tub, and flurting at *Alexander*, accoumpting us but flies, and bladders puffed with winde, was a more sharpe, a more bitter, and a more stinging judge, and by consequence, more just and fitting my humour, then *Timon*, surnamed the hater of all mankinde. For looke what a man hateth, the same thing he takes to hart. *Timon* wisht all evill might light on-us; He was passionate in desiring our ruine. He shunned and loathed our conversation as dangerous and wicked; and of a depraved nature: Whereas the other so little regarded-us, that wee could neither trouble nor alter him by our contagion; forsooke our company, not for feare, but for disdain of our commerce: He never thought us capable or sufficient to doe either good or evill. Of the same stampe was the answer of *Statilius*, to whom *Brutus* spake to winne him to take part, and adhere to the conspiracy against *Cæsar*: He allowed the enterprize to be very just, but disallowed of the men that should performe the same, as unworthy that any man should put himselfe in any adventure for them: Conformable to discipline of *Hegesias*, who saide, *That a wise man ought never to doe any thing but for himselfe*; forasmuch as he alone is worthy to have any action performed for him : and to that of *Theodorus*, who thought it an injustice, *that a wise man should in any case hazard himself for the good and benefit of his country , or to indanger his wisdom for fooles*. Our owne condition is as ridiculous, as risible.