

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 9

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Of Lyers

THERE IS NO MAN living, whom it may lesse beseeme to speake of memorie, then myselfe, for to say truth, I have none at all: and am fullie perswaded that no-mans can-be so weake and forgetfull as mine. All other partes are in me common and vile, but touching memorie, I thinke to carrie the prise from all-other, that have it weakest, nay and to gaine the reputation of it, besides the naturall want I endure (for truely considering the necessitie of it, *Plato* hath reason to name it *A great and mightie Goddesse*). In my countrie, if a man will imply that one hath no sense, he will say, such a one hath no memorie: and when I complaine of mine, they reprove me, and will not beleeve me, as if I accused my-selfe to be mad and senselesse.¹ Which is an empairing of my market: But they do me wrong, for contrariwise, it is commonly seene by experience, that excellent memories do rather accompanie weake judgements. Moreover they wrong me in this (who can do nothing so well as to be a perfect friend) that the same wordes which accuse my infirmitie, represent ingratitude. From my affection they take holde of my memorie, and of a naturall defect, they inferre a want of judgement or conscience. Some will say, he hath forgotten this prayer, or that promise, he is not mindefull of his old friends, he never remembered to say, or doe, or conceale this or that, for my sake. Verily I may easily forget, but to neglect the charge my friend hath committed to my trust, I never do it. Let them beare with my infirmitie, and not conclude it to be a kind of malice; which is so contrarie an enemie to my humour. Yet am I somewhat comforted. First, because it is an evill, from which I have chiefly drawne the reason to correct a worse mischiefe, that would easily have growne upon me: that is to say, ambition; which defect is intolerable in them that meddle with worldly negotiations. For as diverse like examples of natures progresse, say, she hath happily strengthened other faculties in me, according as it hath growne weaker and weaker in me, and I should easily lay downe and wire-draw my mind and judgement, upon other mens traces, without exercising their proper forces, if by the benefite of memorie, forraine inventions and strange opinions were present with me. That my speech is thereby shorter: For the Magazin of Memorie, is peradventure more stored with matter, then is the store-house of Invention. Had it held out with me, I had ere this wearied all my friends with prating: the subjects rousing the meane facultie I have to manage

and imploy them, strengthening and wresting my discourses. It is pittie; I have assaid by the trial of some of my private frinds: according as their memorie hath ministered them a whole and perfect matter, who recoile their narration so farre-backe, and stuff-it with so many vaine circumstances, that if the story be good, they smother the goodnesse of it: if bad, you must needs either curse the good fortune of their memorie, or blame the misfortune of their judgement. And it is no easie matter, being in the midst of the cariere of a discourse, to stop cunningly, to make a sodaine periode, and to cut-it-off. And there is nothing whereby the cleane strength of a horse is more knowne, then to make a readie and cleane stop. Among the skilfull I see some that strive, but cannot stay their race. Whilest they labor to finde the point to stop their course, they stagger and falter, as men that faint through weaknesse. Above all, old men are dangerous, who have onelie the memorie of things past left them, and have lost the remembrance of their repetitions. I have heard some very pleasant reports become most irkesome and tedious in the mouth of a certaine Lord, forsomuch as all the by-standers had manie times beene cloyed with them. Secondly, (as saide an auncient Writer) that, *I do not so much remember injuries received.* I had neede have a prompter as *Darius* had, who not to forget the wrongs he had received of the Athenians, whensoever he sate downe at his table, caused a page to sing unto him, *Sir, remember the Athenians,* and that the places or bookes which I read-over, do ever smile upon me, with some new noveltie. It is not without reason, men say, that *hee who hath not a good and ready memorie, shoulde never meddle with telling of lies, and feare to become a liar.* I am not ignorant how the Grammarians make a difference betweene speaking untrue and lying; and saie that to speake untruly, is to speake that which is false, but was reputed true; and that the definition of the latine worde, *mentiri*, whence the French word, *mentir*, is derived, which in English is to lie, implyeth and meaneth to goe against ones conscience: and by consequence it concerneth only those, who speake contrary to that which they knowe, of whom I speake. Now these, either invent, seale, stampe and all, or else they disguise and change a true grounde. When they disguise or change, if they bee often put to the repetition of one thing, it is hard for them to keepe-still in one path, and verie strange if they loose not themselves: because the thing, as it is, having first taken up her stand in the memory, and there by the way of knowledge and witting, imprinted it-selfe, it were hard it should not represent it selfe to the imagination, displacing and supplanting falsehood, which therein can have no such footing, or settled fastnesse; and that the circumstances of the first apprentishippe, still diving into the minde, should not cause it to disperse the remembrance of all false or bastardized partes gotten together. Where they altogether invent, forsomuch as there is no certaine impression, to front their falsehood, they seeme to have so much the lesse feare to mistake or forget themselves, which also notwithstanding being an ayrie bodie, and without hold-fast may easily escape the memorie, except it be well assured: whereof I have often (to my no small pleasure) seene the experience, at the cost of those, who professe never to frame their speech, but as best shall fit the affaires, they negotiate, and as best shall please the great men, they speake unto. For the circumstances to which they will subject their credite and conscience, being subject to many changes, their speech must likewise diversifie and change with them, whence it followeth that of one selfe-same subject they speak diversly, as now white, now gray, to one man thus, and thus to an other.

And if peradventure these kinde of men hoard-up their so contrarie instructions, what becomes of this goodly arte? Who besides, often most foolishly forget themselves, and runne at randon: For, what memorie shall suffice them, to remember so many different formes they have framed to one same subject? I have in my dayes seene divers that have envied the reputation of this worthie kinde of wisdom, who perceive not, that if there bee a reputation, there can be no effect. Verily, lying is an ill and detestable vice. Nothing makes us men, and no other meanes, keepes us bound one to another, but our word; knew we but the horreur and consequence of it, we would with fire and sword pursue and hate the same, and more justly then any other crime. I see all men generally busied (and that verie improperly) to punish certaine slight and childish errors in children, which have neither impression nor consequence, and chastice and vex them for rash and fond actions. Onely lying, and stubbornnesse somewhat more, are the faults whose birth and progresse I would have severely punished and cut off; for they growe and encrease with them: and if the tongue have once gotten this ill habite, good Lord how hard, nay how impossible it is to make her leave it? whereby it ensueth, that we see many very honest men in other matters, to be subject and enclined to that fault. I have a good lad to my tailour, whom I never heard speake a truth; no not when it might stand him instead of profit. If a lie had no more faces but one, as truth hath; we should be in farre better termes then we are: For, whatsoever a lier should say, we would take it in a contrarie sense. But the opposite of truth hath many-many shapes, and an undefinite field. The Pythagorians make good to be certaine and finite, and evill to be infinite and uncertaine. A thousand by-ways misse the marke, one onely hits the-same. Surely I can never assure my selfe to come to a good end, to warrant an extreame and evident danger, by a shamelesse and solemne lie.

An ancient Father saieth, *We are better in the company of a knowne dogge, than in a mans societie, whose speach is unknowne to us. Ut externus alieno non sit hominis vice: A stranger to a stranger is not like a man.* And how much is a false speach lesse sociable than silence? King Francis the first, vaunted himselfe to have by this meanes brought Francis Taverna, Ambassador of Francis Sforza, Duke of Millane to a non-plus; a man very famous for his rare eloquence, and facilitie in speach, who had beene dispatched to excuse his maister, towarde his Majestie, of a matter of great importance, which was this. The King to keepe ever some intelligence in *Italie*, whence he had lately beene expelled, but especially in the Dukedome of *Millane*, thought it expedient to entertaine a Gentleman of his about the Duke; in effect as his Ambassador, but in apparance as a private man; who should make shew to reside there about his particular affaires, forsomuch as the Duke, who depended much more of the Emperour (chiefly then that he was treating a marriage with his niece, daughter of the king of *Denmarke*, who is at this day Dowager of *Lorraine*) could not without great prejudice unto himself discover to have any correspondencie and conferene with us. For which commission and purpose a Gentleman of *Millane*, named *Merveille*, then serving the King in place of one of the Quiers of his Quierie, was deemed fit. This man being dispatched with secret letters of credence, and instructions of an Ambassador, together with other letters of commendation to the Duke in favour of his particular affaires, as a maske and pretence of his proceedings, continued so long about the Duke, that the Emperour beganne to have some suspition of him; which

as we suppose was cause of what ensued, which was, that under colour of a murther committed, the Duke one night caused the saide *Merveille* to be beheaded, having ended his processe in two daies. Maister *Francis* being come to the Court, fraught with a long counterfet deduction of this storie (for the King had addressed himselfe to all the Princes of Christendome, yea and to the Duke himselfe for justice, for such an outrage committed upon his servant) had one morning audience in the Kings councill-chamber: who for the foundation of his cause having established and to that end projected many goodly and colourable apparences of the fact: namely, that the Duke his maister, had never taken *Merveille* for other then a private gentleman, and his owne subject, and who was come thither about his private busines, where he had never lived under other name, protesting he had never knowne him to be one of the Kings household, nor never heard of him, much lesse taken him for his Majesties Agent. But the King urging him with divers objections and demaunds, and charging him on every side, prest him so farre with the execution done by night, and as it were by stealth, that the seelie man, being much entangled and sodainely surprised, as if he wourld set an innocent face on the matter, answered, that for the love and respect of his Majestie, the Duke his Maister, would have beene very loath that such an execution should have bin done by day. Heere every man may guesse whither he were taken short or no, having tripped before so goodly a nose, as was that of our King *Francis* the first. Pope *Julius* the second, having sent an Ambassador to the King of *England* to animate him against our foresaid King: the Ambassador having had audience touching his charge, and the King in his answere urging and insisting upon the difficultie he found and foresaw in levying such convenient forces, as should be required to withstand so mightie, and set upon so puissant a King, and alleaging certaine pertinent reasons: The Ambassador fondly and unfitly replied, that him-selfe had long before maturely considered them, and had told the Pope of them. By which answer so farre from his proposition (which was with al speed, and without more circumstances to undertake and undergoe a dangerous warre) the King of *England* tooke holde of the first argument which in effect he afterwarde found true, which was, that the saide Ambassador, in his owne particular intent, was more affected to the French side, whereof advertising his maister, his goods were all confiscate, himselfe disgraced, and he verie hardly escaped with life.