

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book I · Chapter 9



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Of Lyers

THERE IS NO MAN living, whom it may lesse beseeme to speake of memorie, than myselfe, for to say truth, I have none at all: and am fully perswaded that no mans can be so weake and forgetfull as mine. All other parts 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 mighty 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 myselfe to be mad and senselesse. They make no diferece betweene memorie and wit: which is an empairing of my market: But they doe me wrong, for contrariwise it is commonly seene by experience, that excellent memories do rather accompany weake judgements. Moreover they wrong me in this (who can do nothing so well as to be a perfect friend) that the same words which accuse my infirmitie, represent ingratitude. From my affection they take hold of my memorie, and of a naturall defect, they infer a want of judgement or conscience. Some will say, he hath forgotten this entreaty or request, or that promise, he is not mindful 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 humor.

Yet am I somewhat comforted. First, because it is an evil, from which I have chieflie 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 divers 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 minde and judgement, upon other mens traces, without exercising their proper forces, if by the benefit of memorie, forren 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, than 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 employ them, strengthening and wresting my discourses. It is pitie; I have assayed by the trial of some of my private friends: according as their memory hath ministered them a whole and perfect matter, who recoil their narration so farre-backe, and stuff it with so many vaine circumstances, that if the story bee 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 carriere of a discourse, to stop cunningly, to make a sudden period, and to cut it off. And there is nothing whereby the cleane strength of a horse is more knowne, than to make a readie and cleane stop. Among the skilfull I see some that strive, but cannot stay their race. Whilest they labour 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 onely 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, forso much as all the bye-standers had many times beene cloyed with them. Secondly (as said an ancient Writers) that *I doe not so much remember injuries received*. I had need have a prompter as *Darius* had, who not to forget the wrong 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 he who hath not a good and readie memorie should 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 say that to speake untruly is to speake that which is false, but was reputed true; and that the definition of the Latin word, *mentiri*, whence the French word, *mentir*, is derived, which in English is to lie, implieth and meaneth to goe against ones conscience: and by consequence it concerneth onely those, who speake contrary to that which they know, of whom I speake. Now, these, either invent, seale, stampe and all, or else they disguise and change a true ground. When they disguise or change, if they be often put to the repetition of one thing, it is hard for them to keepe still in one path, and very strange if they lose 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 itselfe, it were hard it should not represent itselfe to the imagination, displacing and supplanting falshood, which therein can have no such footing, or settled fastnesse; and that the circumstances of the first learning, still diving into the minde, should not cause it to disperse the remembrance of all false or bastardizing parts gotten together. Where they altogether invent, forso much as there is no certaine impression, to front their falshood, they seeme to have so much the lesser feare to mistake or forget themselves, which also notwithstanding being an airie 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 speak unto. For the circumstances to which they will subject their credit and conscience, being subject to many changes, their speech must likewise diversifie and change with them, whence it followeth that of one selfsame subject they speak diversly, as now yellow, now gray, to one man thus, and thus to another. And if peradventure these kind of men hoard-up their so contrarie instructions, what becomes of this goodly art? Who besides, often most foolishly forget themselves, and run 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 worthy kind of wisdom, who perceive not, that if there be a reputation, there can be no effect.

Verily, lying is an ill and detestable vice. Nothing makes us men, and no other meanes keeps us bound one to another, but our word; knew we but the horror and weight of it, we would with fire and sword pursue and hate the same, and more justly than any other crime. I see all men generally busied (and that verie improperly) to punish certaine innocent errorrs 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 grow and increase with them: and if the tongue have once gotten this ill-habit, 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 bee subject and enthralled to that fault. I have a good lad to my tailour, whom I never heard speak a truth, no not when it might stand him instead of profit.

If a lie had no more faces but one, as truth had, we should be in farre better termes than we are: For whatsoever a lier should say, we would take it in a contrarie sense. But the opposite of truth has many shapes, and an undefinite field.

The Pythagoreans make good to be certaine and finite and evil to be infinite and uncertain. A thousand by-ways misse the marke, one onely hits the same. Surely I can never assure myselfe to come to a good end, to warrant an extreme evident danger, by a shamelesse and solemne lie.

An ancient father saith, *We are better in the companie of a known dogge, than in a mans societie, whose speech is unknowne to us. Vt externus alieno non sit hominis vice: A stranger to a stranger is not like a man.* And how much is a false speech 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 speech, who had beene dispatched to excuse his master, toward 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 apparence 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 (chiefely 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 himselfe discover to have any correspondencie and conference with us. For which commision and purpose a Gentleman of *Millane*, named *Merveille*, then serving the King in place of one of the Quiers of his Querie, 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 began to have some suspicion 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 said *Merveille* to be beheaded, having ended his processe in two dayes. Master 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 apperances of the fact: namely, that the Duke his master had never taken *Merveille* for other than 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 King's houshold, nor never heard of him, much lesse taken him for his Majesties Agent. But the King urging him with divers, objections and demands, and charging him on every side, prest him so farre with the execution done by night, and as it were by stealth, that the seely man, being much entangled and suddenly surprised, as if he would set an innocent face on the matter answered, that for the love and respect of his Majestie, the Duke his Master would have beene very loth that such an execution should have beene done by day. Heere every man may guesse whether he were taken short or no, having tripped before so goodly a nose, as was that of our King *Francis* the first.

Pope *Iulius* the second, having sent an ambassador to the King of *England* to animate him against our aforesaid King: the Ambassador having his audience touching his charge, and the King in his answer 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 puisant a King, and alleaging certaine pertinent reasons: The Ambassador fondly and unfitly replied, that himselfe had long before maturely considered them and had told the Pope of them. By which answer so farre from his proposition (which was with all speed, and without more circumstances to undertake and undergoe a dangerous warre) the King of *England* tooke hold of the first argument which in effect he afterward found true, which was, that the said Ambassador, in his owne particular intent, was more affected to the French side, whereof advertising his master, his goods were all confiscate, himselfe disgraced, and he very hardly escaped with life.