

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 2 · Chapter 13



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Of judging of others death

WHEN WE JUDGE of others assurance or boldnesse in death, which without all peradventure, is the most remarkeable action of humane life, great heede is to be taken of one thing, which is, that a man will hardly beleewe he is come to that point. Few men die with a resolution, that it is their last houre: And no where doth hopes-deceite amuse us more. She never ceaseth to ring in our eares, that others have beene sicker, and yet have not died; the case is not so desperate as it is taken; and if the worst happen, God hath done greater wonders. The reason is, that we make to much account of our selves. It seemeth, that the generalitie of things doth in some sort suffer for our annullation, and takes compassion of our state. Forsomuch as our sight being altered, represents unto it selfe things alike; and we imagine, that things faile it, as it doth to them: As they who travell by Sea, to whom mountaines, fields, townes, heaven and earth, seeme to goe the same motion, and keepe the same course, they doe:

Prouehimur portu, terræque urbésque recedunt.

*We sayling launch from harbor, and
Behinde our backes leave townes, leave land.*

Who ever sawe old age, that commended not times past, and blamed not the present, charging the world and mens customes with hir miserie, and lowring discontent?

*Iámque caput quassans grandis suspirat arator,
Et cùm tempora temporibus præsentia confert
Præteritis, laudat fortunas sæpe parentis
Et crepat antiquum genus ut pietate repletum.*

*The gray-beard plow-man sighs, shaking his hoarie head,
Compares times that are newe, with times past heretofore,
Praises the fortunes of his father long since dead,
And crakes of ancient men, whose honestie was more.*

Wee entertaine and carrie all with us: Whence it followeth, that wee deeme our death to be some great matter, and which passeth not so

easily, nor without a solemne consultation of the Starres; *Tot circa unum caput tumultuantes Deos. So many Gods keeping a stirre about one mans life.* And so much the more we thinke it, by how much more we prise ourselves. What? Should so much learning and knowledge be lost with so great dommage, without the Destinies particular care? A soule so rare and exemplar, costs it no more to be killed, then a popular and unprofitable soule? This life, that covereth so many others, of whom so many other lives depend, that, for his use possesseth so great a part of the world, and filleth so many places, is it displaced as that which holdeth by it's owne simple string? No one of us thinks it sufficient, to be but one. Thence came those words of *Cæsar* to his pilot, more prowdly swolne, then the Sea that threatned him:

*Italiam si cælo authore recusas,
Me pete: sola tibi causa hæc est iusta timoris,
Uectorem non nosse tuum perrumpe procellas
Tutela secure mie:*

*If Italie thou doe refuse with heav'n thy guide,
Turne thee to me: to thee onely just cause of feare
Is that thy passinger thou know'st not: stormie tide
Breake through, secure by guard of me, whom thou dost beare.*

And these.

*credit iam digna pericula Cæsar
Fatis esse suis: tantúsque euertere (dixit)
Me superis labor est, parua quem puppe sedentem.
Tam magno petiere mari.*

*Cæsar doth now beleeve, those dangers worthie are
Of his set fate; and saies, doe Gods, take so much paine
Me to undoe, whom they thus to assault prepare
Set in so small a skiffe, in such a surging maine?*

And this common foppery, that *Phæbus* for one whole yeare, bare mourning weedes on his forehead for the death of him:

*Ille etiam extincto miseratus Cæsare Romam,
Cùm caput obscura nitidum ferrugine textit.*

*The Sunne did pittie take of Rome when Cæsar dide,
When he his radiant head in obscure rust did hide.*

And a thousand such, wherewith the world suffers it selfe to be so easily conicatcht, deeming that our owne interests disturbe heaven, and his infinitie is moved at our least actions. *Non tanta cælo societas nobiscum est, ut nostro fato mortalis sit ille quoque siderum fulgor.* There is no such societie betweene heaven and us, that by our destinie the shining of the starres should be mortall as we are. And to judge a resolution and constancie in him, who though he be in manifest danger, dooth not yet beleeve it, it is no reason: And it sufficeth not, that he die in that ward, unlesse he have directly, and for that purpose put himselfe into it: It hapneth, that most men set a sterne countenance on the matter, looke big, and speake stoutly, thereby

to acquire reputation, which if they chance to live, they hope to enjoy. Of all I have seene die, fortune hath disposed their countenances, but not their desseignes. And of those which in ancient times have put themselves to death, the choise is great, whether it were a sodaine death, or a death having time and leasure. That cruell Romane Emperour, said of his prisoners, that hee would make them feele death: And if any fortun'd to kill himselfe in prison, That fellow hath escaped me (would he say.) He would extend and linger death, and cause it, be felt by torments.

*Uidimus & toto quamuis in corpore cæso,
Nil animæ lethale datum, morémque nefandæ
Durum sæuitiæ, pereuntis parcere morti.*

*And we have seeene, when all the body tortur'd lay,
Yet no stroke deadly giv'n, and that in humane way
Oftyranny, to spare his death that sought to die.*

Verely, it is not so great a matter, being in perfect health, and well settled in minde, for one to resolve to kill himselfe: It is an easie thing to shew stoutnes and play the wag before one come to the pinch. So that *Heliogabalus* the most dissolute man of the world, amidst his most riotous sensualities, intended, whensoever occasion should force him to it, to have a daintie death. Which, that it might not degenerate from the rest of his life, hee had purposely caused a stately towre to be built, the nether part and fore-court whereof was floored with boardes richly set and enchased with gold and precious stones, from-off which hee might headlong throwe himselfe downe: He had also caused cordes to be made of gold and crimson silke, therewith to strangle himselfe: And a ritche golden rapier, to thrust himselfe through: And kept poison in boxes of Emeraldes and Topases, to poison himselfe with, according to the humor hee might have, to chuse which of these deaths should please him.

Impiger & fortis uirtute coacta.

*A ready minded gallant,
And inforst valour valiant.*

Notwithstanding, touching this man, the wantonnesse of his preparations makes it more likely, that he would have fainted, had he beene put to his triall. But even of those, who most undantedly have resolved themselves to the execution, we must consider (I say) whether it were with a life-ending stroke, and that tooke away any leasure to feele the effect thereof. For, it is hard to gesse, seeing life droope away by little and little, the bodies-feeling entermingling it selfe with the soules, meanes of repentance being offered, whether in so dangerous an intent, constancie or obstinacie were found in him. In *Cæsars* civill warres, *Lucius Domitius* taken in *Prussia*, having empoisoned himselfe, did afterward rue and repent his deede. It hath hapned in our dayes, that some having resolved to die, and at first not stricken deepe enough, the smarting of his flesh, thrusting his arme backe, twice or thrice more wounded himselfe anew, and yet could never strike sufficiently deepe. Whilst the arraignment of *Plantius Silvanus* was preparing, *Urgulania* his grandmother, sent him a poignard, wherewith not able to kill himselfe throughly, hee caused his owne servants to cutte his veines. *Albucilla* in

Tiberius time, purposing to kill himselfe, but striking over faintly, gave his enemies leasure to apprehend and imprison him, and appoint him what death they pleased.¹ So did Captaine *Demosthenes* after his discomfiture in *Sicilie*. And *C. Fimbria* having over feeblie wounded himselfe, became a sutor to his boy, to make an end of him. On the other side, *Ostorius*, who forsomuch as hee could not use his owne arme, disdained to employ his servants in any other thing but to hold his dagger stiffe and strongly; and taking his running, himselfe caried his throate to it's point, and so was thrust through. To say truth, it is a meate a man must swallow without chewing, unlesse his throate be frostshod. And therefore *Adrianus* the Emperour made his Phisitian to marke and take the just compasse of the mortall place about his pap, that so his aime might not faile him, to whom he had given charge to kill him. Loe why *Cæsar* being demanded; which was the death he most allowed, answered, *the least premeditated, and the shortest*. If *Cæsar* saide it, it is no faintnesse in me to beleieve it. *A short death (saith Plinie) is the chiefe happes of humane life*. It grieveth them to acknowledge it. No man can be saide, to be resolved to die, that feareth to purchase it, and that cannot abide to looke upon, and out-stare it with open eyes. Those, which in times of execution are seene to runne to their end, and hasten the execution, doe it not with resolution, but because they will take away time to consider the same; it grieves them not to be dead, but to die.

Emori nolo, sed me esse mortuum, nihil æstimo.

*I would not die too soone,
But care not, when tis doone.*

It is a degree of constancie, unto which I have experienced to arrive, as those that cast themselves into danger, or into the Sea, with closed eyes. In mine opinion, there is nothing more worthy the noting in *Socrates* life, then to have had thirtie whole dayes to ruminare his deaths-decree, to have digested it all that while, with an assured hope, without dismay or alteration, and with a course of actions and words, rather supprest, and loose-hanging, then out-stretched and raised by the weight of such a cogitation. That *Pomponius Atticus*, to whome *Cicero* writeth, being sicke, caused *Agrippa* his sonne in lawe, and two or three of his other friends to be called-for, to whom he saide; that hauing assaied, how he got nothing in going about to be cured, and what he did to prolong his life, did also lengthen and augment his griefe, he was now determind to make an end of one and other; intreating them to allow of his determination, and that by no meanes, they would loose their labour to disswade him from it. And having chosen to end his life by abstinence, his sickenes was cured by accident; The remedy he had employed to make himselfe away, brought him to health againe. The Physitions, and his friendes, glad of so happy a successe, and rejoycing thereof with him, were in the end greatly deceived; for, with all they could doe, they were never able to make him alter his former opinion, saying, that as he must one day passe that cariere, and being now so forward, he would remooove the care, another time to beginne againe. This man having with great leasure apprehended death, is not onely no whit discouraged, when hee comes to front it, but resolutely falles upon it: for, being satisfied of that, for which he was entred the combate, in a braverie he thrust himselfe into it, to see the end of it. It is farre from fearing death, to goe about to taste and savour the same. The

historie of *Cleanthes* the philosopher, is much like to this. His goomes being swolne, his Physitions perswaded him to use great abstinence; having fasted two dayes, hee was so well amended, as they tolde him he was well, and might returne to his wonted course of life. He contrarily, having already tasted some sweetenes in this fainting, resolveth not to drawe backe, but finish what he had so well begunne, and was so farre waded into. *Tullius Marcellinus*, a yoong Romane Gentleman, willing to prevent the houre of his destinie, to ridde himselfe of a disease, which tormented him more than he would endure, although Physitions promised certainly to cure him, howbeit not sodainely; called his friends unto him to determine about it: some (saieth *Seneca*) gave him that counsell, which for weakenes of heart, themselves would have taken, others for flatterie that, which they imagined would be most pleasing unto him: but a certaine Stoike standing by, saide thus unto him. *Toyle not thy selfe Marcellinus, as if thou determinedst some weightie matter; to live is no such great thing, thy base groomes and brute beasts live also, but it is a matter of consequence to die honestly, wisely and constantly. Remember how long it is, thou doest one same thing, to eat, to drinke, and sleepe, to drinke, to sleepe, to eat. Wee are ever incessantly wheeling in this endlesse circle.* Not onely bad and intollerable accidents, but the very sacietie to live, brings a desire of death. *Marcellinus* had no neede of a man to counsell, but of one to helpe him: his servants were afraide to meddle with him; but this Philosopher made them to understand, that familiars are suspected, onely when the question is, whether the maisters death have beene voluntary: otherwise it would be as bad an example to hinder him, as to kill him, forsomuch as,

Invitum qui servat, idem facit occidenti.

*Who saves a man against his will,
Doth ev'n as much as he should kill.*

Then he advertized *Marcellinus*, that it would not be unseemely, as fruit or comfets at our tables, when our bellies be full, are given unto by-standers, so the life ended, to distribute something to such as have beene the ministers of it. *Marcellinus* being of a franke and liberall disposition, caused certaine summes of money to be divided amongst his servants, and comforted them. And for the rest, there needed neither yron nor blood, hee undertooke to departe from this life, not by running from it: Not to escape from death, but to taste it. And to have leisure to condition or bargaine with death, having quit all manner of nourishment, the third day ensuing, after hee had caused himselfe to be sprinckled over with luke-warme water, by little and little he consumed away; and (as he saide) not without some voluptuousnesse and pleasure. Verily, such as have had these faintings and swoynings of the heart; which proceed from weakenesse, say, that they feele no paine at all in them, but rather some pleasure, as of a passage to sleepe and rest. These are premeditated, and digested deaths. But that *Cato* alone, may serve to all examples of vertue, it seemeth, his good destiny, caused that hand wherewith he gave himselfe the fatall blowe, to be sicke and sore: that so he might have leisure to affront death, and to embrace it, re-enforcing his courage in that danger, in lieu of mollifying the same. And should I have represented him in his prowdest state, it should have beene all bloody-gored, tearing his entrailles, and rending his guttes, rather then with a

sword in his hand, as did the Statuaries of his time. For, this second murther, was much more furious, then the first.

NOTES

- ¹ Albucilla was a woman. The pronouns in this sentence are wrong and corrected in later editions. Montaigne's original sentence (*Albucilla du temps de Tibere, s'estant pour se tuer frappée trop mollement, donna encores à ses parties moyen de l'emprisonner et faire mourir à leur mode.*) gives only one indication of Albucilla's gender: *frappée*.