

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 2 · Chapter 29



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Of Vertue

I FINDE by experience, that there is great difference betweene the sodaine fits and fantasies of the soule, and a resolute disposition and constant habitude: And I see, there is nothing but we may attaine unto, yea, as some say, to exceede Divinitie it selfe; forsomuch as it is more to become impassible of himselfe, then to be so by his originall condition: and that one may joyne a resolution and assurance of God to mans imbecilitie. But it is by fits. And in the lives of those Heroes or noble worthies of former ages, are often found wonderfull parts, and which seeme greatly to exceede our naturall forces: but they are prankes or parts consonant to truth: and it may hardly be believed, mans soule may so be tainted and fed with those so high-raised conditions, that unto it they may become as ordinary and naturall. It hapneth unto our selves, who are but abortive broodes of men, sometimes to rowze our soule farre beyond her ordinary pitch, as stirred up by the discourses, or provoked by the examples of others. But it is a kinde of passion, which urgeth, mooveth, agitateth and in some sorte ravisheth her from out her selfe: for, that gust overblowne, and storme past, we see, it will unawares unbend and loose it selfe, if not to the lowest pitch, at least to be no more the same she was, so that upon every slight occasion, for a bird lost, or for a glasse broken, we suffer our selves to be mooved and distempered very neere as one of the vulgar sort. *Except order, moderation and constancie, I imagine all things may bee done by an indifferent and defective man.* Therefore say wisemen, that directly to judge of a man, his common actions must specially be controled, and he must every day be surprised in his worky-day clothes. *Pyrrho*, who framed so pleasant a Science of ignorance, assaide (as all other true Philosophers) to fashion his life answerable to his doctrine. And forsomuch as hee maintained the weakenesse of mans judgement, to be so extreame, as it could take nor resolution, nor inclination: and would perpetually suspend it, ballancing, beholding and receiving all things, as indifferent: It is reported of him, that he ever kept himselfe after one fashion, looke and countenance: If he had begunne a discourse, he would end it, though the partie to whom he spake, were gone: And if he went any where, he would not goe an inche out of his path, what let or obstacle somever came in his way; being kept from falls, from cartes or other accidents by his friends. For, to feare or shunne any thing, had beene to shocke his propositions, which remooved all election and certainty from his very

senses. He sometimes suffered himselfe to be cut and cauterized, with such constancie, as he was never seene so much as to shrug, twitch, move or winke with his eyes. It is something to bring the minde to these imaginations, but more to joine the effects unto it, yet is it not impossible. But to joine them with such preseverance and constancie, as to establish it for an ordinary course; verily in these enterprises so farre from common use, it is almost incredible to be done. The reason is this, that he was sometimes found in his house, bitterly scolding with his wife,¹ and chasing with his sister, for which being reproved, as hee that wronged his indifferencie: What? said he, *must this seely woman also serve as a witnesse to my rules?* Another time, being found to defend himselfe from a dog: *It is* (replied he) *very hard, altogether to dispoile and shake off man:* And man must endeavour and enforce himselfe to resist and confront all things, first by effects, but if the worst befall, by reason and by discourse. It is now about seaven or eight yeares since, that a countrie man, yet living, not above two leagues from this place, having long before beene much vexed and troubled in minde, for his wives jealousy; one day comming home from his worke, and she after her accustomed maner welcomming and entertaining him with brawling and scowlding, as one unable to endure her any longer, fell into such a moodie rage, that sodainely with a Sickle, which he held in his hand, he cleane cut off those parts, that were the cause of her jealousy, and flung them in her face. And it is reported, that a yong gentleman of *France*, amorous and lustie, having by his perseverance at last mollified the hart of his faire mistresse, desperate, because comming to the point of his so long sued-for businesse, he found himselfe unable and unprepared, and that

*non uiriliter
Iners senile penis extulerat caput.*

as soone as he came home, he deprived himselfe of it: and sent it as a cruell and bloody sacrifice for the expiation of his offence. Had he done it by discourse or for religions sake, as the priestes of *Cybele* were wont to do, what might we not say of so haughty an enterprise? Not long since at *Bragerac*, five leagues-distance from my house, up the river of *Dordoigne*, a woman, having the evening before bin grievously tormented, and sore beaten by hir husband; froward and skittish by complexion, determined, though it should cost hir the price of hir life, by one meane or other, to escape his rudenesse, and rising the next morning, went as she was accustomed to visite hir neighbours, to whom in some sort she recommended the state of hir affaires, than taking a sister of hers by the hand, ledde hir along untill shee came uppon the bridge that crosseth the River, and having bid hir hartily farwell; as in the way of sport without shewing any maner of change or alteration, headlong threw herselfe downe into the River, where she perished. And which is more to be noted in hir, is, that this hir determination ripened a whole night in hir head. But the Indian Wives, may not here be forgotten as worthy the noting: Whose custome is, that Husbands have many Wives and for hir that is dearest unto hir Husband, to kil herselfe after him: Every one in the whole course of hir life, endevoareth to obtaine this priviledge and advantage over all hir fellow-wives: And in the good offices and duties they shew their hubands, respect no other recompence, than to be preferred to accompany them in death.

*Vbi mortifero iacta est fax ultima lecto,
 Vxorum fuis, stat pia turba comis:
 Et certamen habent Læthi, quæ uiua sequatur
 Coniugium, pudor est non licuisse mori:
 Ardent uictrices, & flammæ pectora præbent,
 Imponuntque suis or a perusta uiris.*

*When for his death-bed last flame is appli'de
 With loose haire many kind wives stand beside,
 And strive for death, which alive may be next
 Hir wedlocke, who may not is sham'd and vex't
 They that orecome, are burn'd, to flames give way,
 Their bodies burnt on their burnt husbands lay.*

A late Writer affirmeth, that himselfe hath seene this custome highly reputed in the new discovered East Indiaes, where not only the wives are buried with their husbands, but also such slaves as hee hath enjoyed; which is done after this manner. The husband being deceased, the widdow may, if she will (but fewe doe it) request two or three Moneths space to dispose of hir busines. The day come, adorned as a sumptuous bride, she mounteth on horsebacke, and with a cheerful countenance, telleth every body, she is going to lie with hir bridegroom, holding in her left hand a looking-glasse, and an arrow in the right. Thus having a while rid up and downe in great pompe and magnificence, accompanied with her friendes and kins-men, and much concourse of people, in feast and jolitie, she is brought unto a publike place, purposely appointed for such spectacles. Which is a large open place, in the middest wherof is a pit or grave full of Wood, and neere unto it an upraised scaffold, with foure or five steppes to ascend, upon which she is brought, and served with a stately and sumptuous banquet; Which ended, she beginneth to dance and sing, and when she thinks good, commandeth the fire to be kindled. That done, she commeth downe againe, and taking the nearest of hir Husbands kindred by the hand, they goe together to the next River, where shee strippes hir selfe all naked, and distributeth her jewels and clothes among hir friends, then plungeth herselfe in the Water, as if she meant to wash away hir sins; then comming out she enwrappeth herselfe in a yellow piece of linnen cloth, about the length of fourteene yards; And giving hir hand againe unto hir Husbands Kins-man, they returne unto the Mount, where she speakes unto the people, to whom (if she have any) she recommendeth hir Children. Betweene the Pitte and Mount, there is commonly a Curtaine drawne, lest the sight of that burning furnace might dismay them: Which many, to shew the greater courage, will not have it drawne. Her speech ended, a Woman presenteth her with a Vessell ful of Oyle, therewith to annoint hir head and bodie, which done, she casteth the rest into the fire, and therewithall sodainely flings herselfe into it: Which is no sooner done, but the people cast great store of Faggots and Billets upon hir, lest she should languish over-long: and all their joy is converted into grieffe and sorrow. If they be persons of meane quality, the dead mans body is carried to the place where they intend to bury him, and there he is placed sitting; his Widdow kneeling before him with hir armes close about his middle, and so keepeth herselfe, whilst a Wall is erected up about them both, which raised to the height of her shoulders, some of her kindred taking hir by the head behind, wrings her neck about; and having given the last gaspe, the wall is immediately

made up close over their heades, wherein they remaine buried. In the same Country, there was something like to this in their Gymnosophists, or wise-men, who not by meanaces or compulsions of others, nor by the violence of a sodaine humour, but by the expresse and voluntary profession of their rule, their maner was, according as they attained unto a certaine age, or saw themselves threatned by some sicknesse, to cause a pile of Wood to be erected, and upon it a rich bedde; and having cheerefully feasted their friends and acquaintance, with such a resolution laide themselves downe in that bedde, that fire set unto it, they were never seene to stirre nor hand nor foote: And thus died one of them, named *Calanus*, in the presence of all the army of *Alexander* the Great. And who had not so made himselfe away, was neither esteemed holy nor absolutely happy amongst them; sending his soule purged and purified by fire, after it had consumed whatsoever was mortall and terrestriall in it. This constant premeditation of al the life, is that which makes the wonder. Amongst our other disputations, that of *Fatum*, hath much entermedled it selfe; and to joyne future things, and our will it selfe unto a certaine unavoidable necessity, we yet stand upon that argument of former times: since God foreseeeth all things must thus happen, as undoubtedly he doeth: They must then necessarily happen so. To which our Clarks and Maisters answer, that to see any thing come to passe, as we doe, and likewise God (for hee being present in full essence, rather feeth than foreseeeth) is not to force the same to happen: yea we see, because things come to passe, but things happen not because we see. The hapning makes the science or knowledge, and not knowledge the happening. What we see come to passe, happeneth; but it might come to passe otherwise. And God in the eternall register of the causes of happenings, which he hath in his prescience, hath also those, which are called casuall; and the voluntary, which depend of the liberty, he hath given unto our free wil, and knoweth we shall faile, because our will shall have beene to faile. I have seene divers encourage their troupes with this fatall necessitie: For, if our houre be tied unto a certaine point, neither the musket-shottes of our enemies, nor our courage, nor our flight and cowardize, can either advance or recoyle the same.

This may well be saide, but seeke you who shall effect it: And if it be so, that a strong and lively faith, doth likewise draw actions after it: truely this faith (wherewith we so much fill our mouths) is marvelous light in our times: except the contempt it hath of workes, make her disdain their company. So it is, that to the same purpose, the Lord of *Joinville*, as credible a witnesse as any other, tells us of the Bedoins, a nation entermingled with the Saracines, with whom our King Saint *Lewes* had to deale in the holy land, who so confidently believed in their religion, the dayes of every one to be prefixed and numbred from all eternitie, by an inevitable preordonance, that they went all bare and naked to the warres, except a Turkish Glaive in their hand, and their body covered but with a white linnen-cloth: And for the the bitterest curse, if they chanced to fall out one with another, they had ever in their mouth: *Cursed be thou, as he that armeth himselfe for feare of death*. Here is another maner of triall or a beliefe or faith, then ours. In this rank may likewise be placed that, which those two religious men of *Florence*, not long since gave unto their countrymen. Being in some controversie betweene themselves about certaine points of learning; they accorded to goe both into the fire, in the presence of all the people, and in the open market place, each one for the

verifying of his opinion; and all preparations were ready made, and execution to be performed, but that by an unexpected accident it was interrupted. A yong Turkish Lord, having atchieved a notable piece of service in armes, and with his owne person, in full view of the two battels between *Ammurath* and *Huniades* ready to be joyned together, being demanded by *Ammurath* his Prince, who (being so yong and unexperienced, for is was the first warre or service he had seene before) had replenished him with so generous and undanted vigor of courage? answered, that a Hare had beene his soveraigne maister and onely teacher of valour; and thus began his speech. *Being one day a hunting, I found a Hare sitting in her forme, and although I had a brace of excellent good gray-houndes with me in a slip or leash, I thought it good, because I would be sure of my game to use my bow; for she was a very faire marke: I beganne to shoote my arrowes at her, which I did to the number of fortie (for in my quiver were just so many) yet could I never hurt her, no not so much as start her: After all this, I let slip my gray-hounds, who could doe no more then I had done: by which I learnt, that she had beene sheltred and defended by her destinie; and that no glaives nor arrowes never hit, but by the permission of our fatalitie, which it lieth not in us to avoide or advance.* This storie may serve to make us perceive by the way, how flexible our reason is to all sorts of Objects. A notable man, great in yeares, in name, in dignitie and in learning, vaunted himselfe unto me, that he was induced to a certaine most important change of his religion, by a strange and fantastical incitation: and in all things so ill-concluding, that I deemed the same stronger and more forcible, being taken contrary. He termed it a myracle, and so did I, but in a different sense. Their Historians say, that perswasion having popularly beene scattered amongst the Turkes, of the fatall and imployable prescription of their dayes, doth apparantly ayde to warrant and embolden them in dangers. And I know a great Prince, who happily thrives by it, be it he beleive it, or take it for an excuse to hazard himselfe extraordinarily; provided fortune be not soone wearie to favour and backe him. There hath not happened in our memorie a more admirable effect of resolution, than of those two villaines that conspired the death of the Prince of *Orange*: It is strange, how the last, who perfourmed the same could be induced or encouraged to undergoe such an enterprize, wherein his fellow (though he had resolutely attempted it, and had all might be required for such an action) had so ill successe, and miscarried. And *following these steps, and armed with so late an instruction of distrust; mighty in friends and followers; puissant of bodily strength; in his owne hall; amidst his servants and garde; and in a Citty wholly at his devotion. It must of force be saide, that in perfourming it, he employed a well-directed and resolute hand, and a dreadlesse courage, mooved by a vigorous passion.* A Poynard is more sure to wound a man, which forsomuch as it requireth more motion and vigor of the arme, than a pistole, it's stroke is more subject to be hindred or avoided. That the first ranne not to an assured death, I make no great doubt, for the hopes wherewith hee might be entertained could not harbour in a well settled and resolute minde; and the conduct of his exploit, sheweth, he wanted no more that, then corage. The motions of so forcible a perswasion may be diverse; for, our fantasie disposeth of her selfe and of vs as she pleaseth. The execution committed neere *Orleans* had no coherence with this, wherein was more hazard, then vigor; the blow was not mortall, had not fortune made it so: and the enterprize to shoote on horse-backe and farre-off, and to one who mooved still according to the motion of his horse, was the attempt of a man, that rather loved to misse of his effect, then faile to

save himselfe. What followed did manifestly shew it. For, he was so amazed and drunken with the thought of so haughtie an execution, as he lost all his senses, both to worke his escape, and direct his tongue in his answers. What needed he have done more, then recover his friends by crossing of a river? It is a meane, wherein I have cast my selfe in farre lesse dangers, and which I thinke of small hazard, how broade soever, alwayes provided your horse finde an easie entrance, and on the further side you foresee an easie and shallow landing, according to the course or streame of the water. The second, when the horrible sentence was pronounced against him, answered stowtly, *I was prepared for it, and I shall amaze you with my patience.* The Assassines, a nation depending of *Phœnicia*, are esteemed among the Mahometists of a soveraigne devotion and puritie of maners; they hold, that the readiest and shortest way to gaine Paradise, is to kill some one of a contrary religion: therefore hath it often beene seene, that one or two in their bare doublets have undertaken to assault mightie enemies, with the price of an assured death, and without any care of their owne danger. And thus was our Earle *Raymond* of *Tripoli* murdered or assassinated (this word is borrowed from their name) in the midst of his Cittie, during the time of our warres in the holy land: And likewise *Conrade* Marquis of *Montferato*, his murthers being brought to their torture, were seene to swell with pride, that they had performed so worthy an exploit.

 NOTES

- 1 Florio's first translation of this passage, from *wife* to *being reproved* was later corrected to *sister, for which being reproved, ...*