

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 6

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Of exercise or practise

It is a hard matter (although our conceit doe willingly apply it selfe unto it) that Discourse and Instruction, should sufficiently be powerful, to direct us to action, and addresse us to performance, if over and besides that, we doe not by experience exercise and frame our minde, to the traine whereunto we will range-it: otherwise, when we shall be on the point of the effects, it will doubtles finde it selfe much engaged and impeached. And that is the reason why amongst Philosophers, those that have willed to attaine to some greater excellence, have not beene content, at home, and at rest to expect the rigors of fortune, for feare she should surprise them unexperienced, and finde them novices, if she should chance to enter fight with them; but have rather gone to meete and front hir before, and witting-earnestly cast themselves to the triall of the hardest difficulties. Some have thereby voluntarily forsaken great riches, onely to practise a genuine povertie: others have willingly found out labor, and an austeritie of a toylesome life, thereby to harden and enure themselves of the dearest and best parts of their body, as of their eyes, and members of generation, lest their over-pleasing, and too-too wanton service, might in any sort molifie and distract the constant resolution of their minde. But to die, which is the greatest worke we have to doe, exercise can nothing availe us thereunto. A man may, by custome and experience, fortifie himselfe against grieffe, sorrow, shame, want, and such like accident: but concerning death, we can but once feele and trie the same. We are all novices, and new to learne when we come unto it. There have, in former times, beene found men so good husbands and thriftie of time, that even in death they have assayde to taste and savour it; and bent their minde to observe and see, what manner of thing that passage of death was; but none did ever yet come backe againe to tell us tidings of-it.

*nemo expergitus extat
Frigida quem semel est uitai pausa sequuta.*

*No man doth ever-offer make,
Whom once his lifes cold rest doth take.*

Canius Julius, a noble Romane, a man of singular vertue and constancie, having beene condemned to death by that lewdly-mischievous monster of men, *Caligula*: besides many marvelous evident assurances he gave of his matchlesse resolution, when he was even in the nick to endure the last stroke of the executioner; a Philosopher, being his friend, interrupted him with this question, saying: *Canius*, in what state is your soule now? What doth she? What thoughts possesse you now? I thought (answered he) to keep me readie and prepared with all my force, to-see whether in this instant of death, so short and so neere at hand, I might perceive some dislodging or distraction of the soule, and whether it will shew some feeling of hir sodaine departure; that (if I apprehend or learne any thing of hir) I may afterward, if I can, returne, and give advertisement therof unto my friends. Loe-here a Philosopher, not onely until death, but even in death it selfe: what assurance was-it, and what fiercenes of courage, to will that his owne death should serve him as a lesson, and have leasure to thinke elsewhere in a matter of such consequence?

ius hoc animi morientis habebat.

*This powre of minde had he,
When it from him did flee.*

Me seemeth neverthesse, that in some sort, there is a meane to familiarize our selves with it, and to assay-it. We may have some experience of it, if not whole and perfect, at least such as may not altogether be unprofitable, and which may yeelde us better fortified and more assured. If we cannot attaine unto it, we may at least approach-it, and discerne the same: And if we cannot enter hir sort, yet shall we see and frequent the approaches unto-it. It is not without reason we are taught to take notice of our sleepe, for the resemblance it hath with death. How easily we passe from waking to sleeping; with how little interest we loose the knowledge of light, and of our selves. The facultie of sleepe might happily seeme unprofitable, and against nature, sithence it depriveth us of all action, and barreth us of all sense; were it not that nature doth thereby instruct us, that she hath equally made us, as wel to live, as to die; and by life presenteth the eternall state unto us, which she after the same reserveth for us, so to accustome us thereunto, and remove the feare of it from us. But such as by some violent accident are falne into a faintnes of heart, and have lost all senses, they, in mine opinion, have well-nigh beene, where they might beholde hir true and naturall visage: For, touching the instant or moment of the passage, it is not to be feared, it should bring any travell or displeasure with-it, forasmuch as we can have, nor sense, nor feeling without leasure. Our sufferances have neede of time, which is so short, and plunged in death, that necessarily it must be insensible. It is the approaches that lead unto it we should feare; and those may fall within the compasse of mans experience. Many things seeme greater by imagination, then by effect. I have passed over a good part of my age in sound and perfect health. I say, not onely sound, but blithe and wantonly-lustfull. That state full of lust, of prime and mirth, made me deeme the consideration of sicknesses so yrkesome and horrible, that when I came to the experience of them, I have found their fittes but weake, and their assaults but faint, in respect of my apprehended feare. Lo here what I dayly proove. Let me be under a rooffe, in a good chamber, warme-

clad, and well at ease in some tempestuous and stormie night. I am exceedingly perplexed, and much grieved for such as are abroad, and have no shelter: But let me be in the storme my selfe, I doe not so much as desire to be else-where. Onely to be continually pent up in a chamber, seemed intollerable to me. I have now enured my selfe to live a whole weeke, yea a moneth in my chamber, full of care, trouble, alteration and weakenes; and have found, that in the time of my best health I moaned such as were sicke, much more, then I can well moane my selfe when I am ill at ease: and that the power of my apprehension did wel-nigh halfe endear the essence and truth of the thing it selfe. I am in good hope the like will happen to me of death: and that it is not worth the labor I take for so many preparations as I prepare against hir; and so many helps as I call to sustaine, and assemble to endure the shocke and violence of it. But hab or nab we can never take too much advantage of it. During our second or third troubles (I doe not well remember which) I fortun'd one day, for recreation-sake, to goe forth and take the ayre, about a league from my house, who am seated even in the bowels of al troubles of our civill wars of *France*, supposing to be most safe, so neere mine owne home and reitreite, that I had no neede of better attendance or equipage. I was mounted upon a very easie-going nagge, but not very sure. At my returning home againe, a sudaine occasion being offered me, to make use of this nagge in a peece of service, whereto he was neither trained nor accustomed, one of my men (a-strong sturdie fellow) mounted upon a yong strong-headed horse, and that had a desperate hard mouth, fresh, lustie and in breath; to shew his courage, and to out-goe his felowes, fortun'd with might and maine to set spurres unto him, and giving him the bridle, to come right into the path where I was, and as a *Colossus* with his weight riding over me and my nagge, that were both very little, he overthrew us both, and made us fall with our heeles upward: so that the nagge lay along astonied in one place, and I in a trance groveling on the ground ten or twelfe paces wide of him; my face all torne and brused, my sword which I had in my hand a good way from me, my girdle broken, with no more motion or sense in me then a stocke. It is the onely swowning that ever I felt yet. Those that were with me, after they had assayed all possible meanes to bring me to my selfe againe, supposing me dead, tooke me in their armes, and with much adoe were carying me home to my-house, which was about halfe a french league thence, upon the way; and after I had for two houres space, by all, bin supposed dead and past all recoverie, I began to stir and breathe: for, so great aboundance of blood was falne into my stomake, that to discharge it, nature was forced to rowze up hir spirits. I was imediatly set upon my feete, and bending forward, I presently cast up, in quantitie as much clottie pure blood, as a bucket will hold, and by the way was constrained to doe the like divers times before I could get home, whereby I began to recover a little life, but it was by little and little, and so long a doing, that my chiefe senses were much more enclining to death then to life.

*Perche dubbiosa ancor del suo ritorno
Non s'assicura attonita la mente.*

*For yet the minde doubtfull of it's returne
Is not assured, but astonished.*

The remembrance whereof (which yet I beare deeply imprinted in my minde) representing me hir visage and *Idea* so lively and so naturally,

doth in some sort reconcile me unto hir. And when I began to see, it was with so dim, so weake and so troubled a sight, that I could not discrene any thing of the light,

*come quel c'hor' apre, hor chiude
Gli ochii, mezzo tra'l sonno l'esser desto.*

*As he that sometimes opens, sometimes shuts
His eyes, betweene sleeping and being awake.*

Touching the functions of the soule, they started up and came in the same progresse as those of the body. I perceived my selfe all bloodie; for my doublet was all sullied with the blood I had cast. The first conceit I apprehended, was, that I had received some shot in my head; and in truth, at the same instant, there were divers that shot round about us. Me thought, my selfe had no other hold of me, but of my lippes-ends. I closed mine eyes, to helpe (as me seemed) to send it forth, and tooke a kinde of pleasure to linger and languishingly to let my selfe goe from my selfe. It was an imagination swimming superficially in my minde, as weake and as tender as all the rest: but in truth, not onely exempted from displeasure, but rather comixt with that pleasant sweetenes, which they feele that suffer themselves to fall into a soft-slumbring and sense-entrancing sleepe. I beleeve it is the same state, they finde themselves in, whom in the agonie of death we see to droope and faint through weaknes: and am of opinion, we plaine and moane them without cause, esteeming that either they are agitated with grieueous pangs, or that their soule is pressed with painefull cogitations. It was ever my conceite, against the opinion of many, yea and against that of *Stephanus la Boëtie*, that those whom we see, so overwhelmed, and faintly-drooping at the aproches of their end, or utterly cast downe with the lingring tediousnes of their deseases, or by accident of some apoplexie, or falling-evil,

*(ui morbi sæpe coactus
Ante oculos aliquis nostros ut fulminis ictu.
Concidit, & spumas agit, ingemit, & fremit artus,
Desipit, extent at neruos, torquetur, anhelat,
Inconstanter & in iactandò membra fatigat)*

*Some man by force of sicknes driv'n doth fall,
As if by thunder stroke, before our eyes;
He fomes, he grones, he trembles over all,
He raves, he stretches, he's vext, panting lyes,
He tyr's his limmes by tossing,
Now this now that way crossing.*

or hurt in the head, whom wee heare throb and ratle, and send forth grones and gaspes, although wee gather some tokens from them, whereby it seemeth, they have yet some knowledge left, and certaine motions wee see them make with their body: I say, I have ever thought, they had their soule and body buried and asleepe.

Viuít & est uitæ nescius ipse suæ.

*He lives, yet knowes not he,
That he alive should be.*

And I could not beleewe, that at so great an astonishment of members, and deffailance of senses, the soule could maintaine any force within, to know hirselle; and therefore had no manner of discourse tormenting them, which might make them judge and feele the miserie of their condition, and that consequently they were not greatly to be moaned. As for my selfe, I imagine no state so intolerable nor condition so horrible, as to have a feelingly-afflicted soule, voide of meanes to disburthen and declare hir selfe: As I would say of those we send to execution, having first caused their tongue to be cut out, were it not that in this manner of death, the most dumbe seemes unto me the fittest, namely if it be accompanied with a resolute and grave countenance. And as those miserable prisoners which light in the hands of those hard-harted and villenous Souldiers of these times, of whom they are tormented with all manner of cruell entreatie, by compulsion to drawe them unto some excessive and impossible ransome, keeping them all that while in so hard a condition and place, that they have no way left them to utter their thoughts and expresse their miserie. The Poets have fained, there were some Gods, that favoured the release of such as sufferd so languishing deaths.

*hunc ego Diti
Sacrum iussa fero, téque isto corpore soluo.*

*This to death sacred, I, as was my charge,
Doe beare, and from this body thee enlarge.*

And the faltering speeches and uncertaine answeres, that by continuall ringing in their eares and incessant urging them, are sometimes by force wrested from them, or by the motions which seeme to have some simpatie with that whereof they are examined, is notwithstanding no witnes, that they live, at least a perfect sound life. We doe also in yawning, before sleep fully seize upon us, apprehending as it were in a slumber, what is done about us, and with a troubled and uncertain hearing, follow the voices, which seeme to sound but on the outward limits of our soule; and frame answers according to the last words we heard, which taste more of chance then of sense: which thing now I have proved by experience, I make no doubt, but hitherto I have well judged of it. For, first lying as in a trance, I laboured even with my nailes to open my doublet (for I was unarmed) and well I wot, that in my imagination I felt nothing did hurt me. For, there are severall motions in us, which proceed not of our free wil.

Semianimésque micant digiti, ferrúmque retractant.

*The halfe-dead fingers stirre, and feele,
(Though it they cannot stirre) for steele.*

Those that falle, doe commonly by a naturall impulsion cast their armes abroade before their falling, which sheweth, that our members have certaine offices, which they lend one to another, and possesse certain agitations, apart from our discourse:

*Falciferos memorant currus abscindere membra,
Vt tremere in terra uideatur ab artubus, id quod
Decidit abscissum, cùm mens tamen atque hominis uiis
Mobilitate mali non quit sentire dolorem.*

*They say, sithe-bearing chariots limbes bereave,
So as on earth, that which cut-off they leave,
Doth seeme to quake; when yet mans force and minde
Doth not the paine, through so quicke motion, finde.*

My stomacke was surcharged with clotted blood, my hands of themselves were still running to it, as often they are wont (yea against the knowledge of our will) where we feele it to itch. There are many creatures, yea and some men, in whom after they are dead, we may see their muskles to close and stirre. All men know by experience, there be some partes of our bodies, which often without any consent of ours, doe stirre, stand and lie downe againe. Now these passions, which but exteriorly touch us, can not properly be termed ours; For, to make them ours, a man must wholly be engaged unto them: And the paines that our feete or handes feele whilest wee sleepe, are not ours. When I came neere my house, where the tidings of my fall was already come, and those of my housholde met me, with such outcries as are used in like times, I did not onely answer some words, to what I was demanded, but some tell me, I had the memory to commaund my men to give my wife a horse, whom I perceived to be overtired, and labouring in the way, which is very hilly, fowle, and rugged. It seemeth this consideration proceeded from a vigilant soule: yet was I cleane distracted from-it, they were but vaine conceits, and as in a cloud, onely moved by the sense of the eyes and eares: They came not from my selfe. All which notwithstanding, I knew neither whence I came, nor whither I went, nor could I understand or consider what was spoken unto me. They were but light effects, that my senses produced of themselves, as it were of custome. Whatsoever the soule did assist-it with, was but a dreame, being lightly touched, and only sprinkled by the soft impression of the senses. In the meane time my state was verily most pleasant and easefull. I felt no maner of care or affliction, neither for my selfe nor others. It was a slumbering, languishing and extreame weaknesse, without anie paine at all. I saw mine owne house and knew it not; when I was laide in my bedde, I felt great ease in my rest, for I had beene vilely hurried and haled by those poore men, which had taken the paines to carry me upon their armes a long and wearysome way, and to say truth, they had all beene wearied twice or thrice over, and were faine to shift severall times. Many remedies were presently offerd me, but I tooke none, supposing verily I had beene deadly hurt in the head. To say truth, it had beene a very happy death: For, the weakenesse of my discourse hinderd me from judging of it, and the feeblenes of my body from feeling the same. Me-thought I was yeelding up the ghost so gently, and after so easie and indolent a maner, that I feele no other action lesse burthensome then that was. But when I beganne to come to life againe and recover my former strength,

Vt tandem sensus conualuere mei,

*At last when all the sprites I beare,
Recall'd and recollected were.*

which was within two or three houres after, I presently felt my selfe full of aches and paines all my body over; for, each parte thereof was with the violence of the fall much brused and tainted; and for two or three nights after I found my selfe so ill, that I verily supposed I should have died no other death: But more feeling and sensible (and to speak plaine) I feele my bruises yet, and feare me shall doe while I live: I will not forget to tell you, that the laste thing I could rightly fall into againe, was the remembrance of this accident, and I made my men many times to repeate me over and over againe, whither I was going, whence I came, and at what houre that chance befell me, before I could throughly conceive it. Concerning the maner of my falling, they in favor of him who had beene the cause of it, concealed the truth from me, and told me other flim flam tales. But a while after, and the morrow next when my memorie beganne to come to it selfe againe, and represent the state unto me, wherein I was at the instant, when I perceived the horse riding over me (for being at my heeles, I chanced to espie him, and helde my selfe for dead; yet was the conceite so sodaine, that feare had no leasure to enter my thoughts) me seemed it was a flashing or lightning, that smote my soule with shaking, and that I came from another world. This discourse of so slight an accident, is but vaine and frivolous, were not the instructions I have drawne from thence, for my use: For truely, for a man to acquaint himselfe with death, I finde no better way, then to approach unto it. Now as *Plinie* saith, every man is a good discipline unto himselfe, alwayes provided he be able to prie into himselfe. This is not my doctrine, it is but my studie; And not another mans lesson, but mine owne. Yet ought no man to blame me if I impart the same. What serves my turne, may happily serve another mans; otherwise I marre nothing, what I make use of, is mine owne. And if I play the foole, it is at mine owne cost, and without any other bodies interest. For it is but a kinde of folly, that dies in me, and hath no traine. We have notice but of two or three former ancients, that have trodden this path; yet can we not say, whether altogether like unto this of mine, for wee know but their names. No man since hath followed their steppes: it is a thornie and crabbed enterprise, and more then it makes shew-of, to follow so strange and vagabond a path, as that of our spirit: To penetrate the shadie, and enter the thicke-covered depths of these internall winding cranks; To chuse so many, and settle so severall aires of his agitations: And a new extraordinary amusing, that distracts us from the common occupations of the world, yea and from the most recommended. Many yeares are past since I have no other aime, whereto my thoughts bend, but my selfe, and that I controle and study nothing but my selfe. And if I study any thing else, it is imediatly to place it upon, or to say better, in my selfe. And me thinks I erre not, as commonly men doe in other sciences, without all comparrison lesse profitable. I impart what I have learn't by this, although I greatly content not my selfe with the progresse I have made therein. *There is no description so hard, nor so profitable, as is the description of a mans owne selfe.* Yet must a man handsomely trimme-up, yea and dispose and range himselfe to appeare on the theatre of this world. Now I continually trickle up my selfe; for I uncessantly describe my selfe. Custome hath made a mans speach of himselfe, vicious. And obstinately forbids-it in hatred of boasting, which ever seemeth closely to follow ones selfe witnesses, whereas a man should wipe a childes nose, that is now called to un- nose him selfe.

In uicium ducis culpæ fuga.

*Some shunning of some sinne,
Doth draw some further in.*

I finde more evill then good by this remedie: But suppose it were true, that for a man to entertaine the company with talking of himselfe, were necessarily presumption: I ought not following my generall intent, to refuse an action, that publisheth this crazed qualitie, since I have it in my selfe: and I should not conceale this fault, which I have not onely in use, but in profession. Neverthelesse to speake my opinion of it, this custome to condemne wine is much to blame, because many are therewith made drunke. Only good things may be abused. And I believe this rule hath only regard to popular defects: They are snafles wherwith neither Saints, nor Philosophers, nor Divines, whom wee heare so gloriously to speake of themselves, will in any sorte be bridled. No more doe I, though I be no more the one then other. If they write purposely or directly of it, yet when occasion doth conveniently leade them unto it, faine they not, headlong to cast themselves into the listes? Whereof doth *Socrates* treat more at large, then of himselfe? To what doth he more often direct his disciples discourses, then to speake of themselves, not for their bookes lesson, but of the essence and moving of their soule? We religiously shrift our selves to God and our confessor, as our neighbours to all the people. But will some answere mee, we reporte but accusation; wee then reporte all: For, even our vertue it selfe is faultie and repentable; My arte and profession, is to live. Who forbids mee to speake of it, according to my sense, experience, and custome? Let him appoint the Architect to speake of buildings, not according to himselfe, but his neighbours, according to anothers skill, and not his owne. If it be a glory, for a man to publish his owne worth himselfe, why doth not *Cicero* preferre the eloquence of *Hortensius*, and *Hortensius* that of *Cicero*? Some may peradventure suppose that by deedes and effects and not simply by words, I witness of my selfe. I principally set forth my cogitations; a shapelesse subject, and which cannot fall within the compasse of a worke-manlike production: with much adoe can I set it downe in this ayrie body of the voice. Wiser men, and more learned and devout, have lived avoiding all apparant effects. Effect would speake more of fortune, then of me. They witness their part, and not mine; unlesse it be conjecturally and uncertainly: Parcels of a particular shew: I wholly set forth and expose my selfe: It is a *Keletos*; where at first sight appeare al the veines, muskles, gristles, sinnewes, and tennons, each severall parte in his due place. The effect of the cough produceth one part, that of palenesse or panting of the heart another, and that doubtfully. I write not my jests, but my selfe and my essence. I am of opinion that a man must be very wise to esteeme himselfe, and equally consciencious to give testimony of it: be it low, be it high indifferently. If I did absolutely seeme good and wise unto my selfe, I would boldly declare it. To speake lesse of himselfe then he possesseth, is follie and not modestie. To pay himselfe for lesse then he is worth, is basenesse and pusilanimitie, saith *Aristotle*. No vertue aides it selfe with falsehood; and truth is never a matter of errour. And yet for a man to say more of himselfe, then he can well prove, is not ever presumption, though often sottishnesse. For a man to over-weene, and please himselfe exceedingly with what he is, and fall into indiscreet love with himselfe, is in my conceit, the substance of this vice. The best remedie to cure him, is

to do cleane contrary to that which those appoint, who in forbidding men to speake of themselves, do consequently also inhibite more to thinke of themselves. *Pride consisteth in conceit*: The tongue can have no great share in it. For one to amuse on himselfe, is in their imagination to please himselfe: And for a man to frequent and practise himselfe, is at overdeare a rate to endeare himselfe. But this excesse doth onely breede in them, that but superficially feele and search themselves, that are seene to follow their affaires, which call idlenesse and fondnesse, for a man to entertaine, to applaude and to endeare himselfe, and frame Chimeraes, or build castles in the ayre; deeming themselves as a third person and strangers to themselves. If any be besotted with his owne knowledge, looking upon himselfe, let him cast his eyes towards former ages, his pride shall be abated, his ambition shall be quailed; for there shall he find many thousands of spirits, that will cleane suppress and treade him under. If he fortune to enter into any selfe-presumption of his owne worth, let him but call to remembrance the lives of *Scipio* and *Epaminondas*; so many armies, and so many nations, which leave him so farre behinde them. No particular quality shall make him proud, that therewith shall reckon so many imperfect and weake qualities that are in him, and at last, the nullitie of humane condition. Forsomuch as *Socrates* had truely onely nibled on the precept of his God, to know himselfe, and by that studie had learned to contemne himselfe, he alone was esteemed worthy of the name of Wise. Whosoever shall so know himselfe, let him boldly make himselfe knowne by his owne mouth.