

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 3 · Chapter 3



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Of three commerces or societies

WE MUST NOT cleave so fast unto our humours and dispositions. Our chiefest sufficiencie is, to apply our selves to divers fashions. It is a being, but not a life, to be tyde and bound by necessitie to one onely course. The goodliest mindes are those that have most varietie and pliability in them. Behould an honourable testimonie of olde *Cato*: *Huic uersatile ingenium sic pariter ad omnia fuit, ut natum ad id unum diceret, quodcumque ageret. He had a witte so turneable for all things alike, as one would say he had beene onely borne for that hee went about to doe.* Were I to dresse my selfe after mine owne manner, there is no fashion so good, whereto I would be so affected or tied, as not to knowe how to leave and loose it. *Life is a motion unequall, irregulare and multiforme.* It is not to be the friend (lesse the maister) but the slave of ones selfe to followe uncessantlie, and be so addicted to his inclinations, as he cannot stray from them, nor wrest them. This I say now, as being extreamlie pestered with the importunitie of my minde, forsomuch as she cannot amuse hir selfe, but whereon it is busied; not employ it selfe, but bent and whole. How light soever the subject is one gives it, it willinglie amplifieth, and wyre-drawes the same, even unto the highest pitch of toyle. It's idlenesse is therefore a painefull trade unto me, and offensive to my health. Most wittes have neede of extravagant stuffe, to un-benumme and exercise themselves: mine hath neede of it, rather to settle and continue it selfe: *Uitia otii negotio disciendi sunt, The vices of idlenesse should bee shaken off with businesse:* For, the most laborious care and principall studie of it, is, to studie it selfe. Bookes are one of those businesses that seduce it from studie. At the first thoughts that present themselves, it rouseth up and makes prooffe of all the vigor it hath. It exerciseth it's function sometimes towarde force, sometimes towarde order and comelinesse, it rangeth, moderates and fortifieth. It hath of it selfe to awaken the faculties of it: Nature having given it, as unto all other, matter of it's owne for advantage, and subjects fit enough whereon to devise and determine. Meditation is a large and powerfull studie to such as vigorously can taste and employ themselves therein. I had rather forge then furnish my minde.

There is no office or occupation either weaker or stronger, then that of entertaining of ones thoughts according to the minde, whatsoever it be. The greatest make it their vacation, *Quibus uiuere est cogitare, to whom it is*

all one to live and to meditate. Nature hath also favoured it with this privilege, that there is nothing we can doe so long; nor action, whereto we give our selves more ordinarilie and easilie. It is the worke of Gods (saith *Aristotle*) whence both their happinesse and ours proceedeth. Reading serves me especially, to awake my conceite by divers objects; to busie my judgement, not my memorye. Fewe entertainments then, staye me without vigour and force. T'is true that courtesie and beautie possesse me, as much or more, then waight and depth. And because I slumber in all other communications, and lend but the superficial partes of my attention unto them, it often befalleth me, in such kinde of weake and absurde discourses, (discourses of countenance) to blurt out and answer ridiculous toyes, and fond absurdities, unworthie a childe; or wilfullie to holde my peace; therewithall more foolishlie and incivilye. I have a kinde of raving fancie-full behaviour, that retireth me into my selfe; and on the other side, a grosse and childish ignorance of many ordinarie things; by meanes of which two qualities, I have in my dayes committed five or sixe as sottish trikes, as any one whosoever; which to my derogation may be reported. But to follow my purpose, this harshe complexion of mine makes me nice in conversing with men (whome I must picke and cull out for the nonce) and unfit for common actions. We live and negotiate with the people: If their behaviour importune us, if we disdaine to lend our selves to base and vulgar spirites, which often are as regulare as those of a finer mould; and *all wisdom is foolish, that is not conformed to common insipience.* We are no longer to intermeddle either with our, or other mens affaires: and both publike and private forsake such kinde of people.

The least wrested, and most naturall proceedings of our minde, are the fairest; the best occupations, those which are least forced. Good God, how good an office doth wisdom unto those, whose desires she squareth according to their power! There is no science more profitable. As *one may*, was the burden and favoured saying of *Socrates*: A sentence of great substance. Wee must adresse and staye our desires, to things most easie and nearest. Is it not a fond-peevisch humour in me, to disagree from a thousand; to whome my fortune joyneth mee, without whome I cannot live, to adhere unto one or two, that are out of my commerce and conversation; or rather to a fantastically conceite, or fansie-full desire, for a thing I cannot obtaine? My soft behaviours and milde manners, enemies to all sharpnesse and foes to all bitterness, may easilie have discharged me from envie and contention. To be beloved, I say not, but not to be hated, never did man give more occasion. But the coldnesse of my conversation, hath with reason robde me of the goodwill of many; which may be excused, if they interpret the same to other, or worse sense. I am most capable of getting rare amities, and continuing exquisite acquaintances. For-so-much as with so greedie hunger I snatch at such acquaintances as answer my taste and square with my humour. I so greedilie produce and head-long cast my selfe upon them, that I doe not easily misse to cleave unto them, and where I light-on, to make a steadie impression; I have often made happy and successefull triall of it.

In vulgar worldlie friendships, I am somewhat colde and barren; for my proceeding is not naturall, if not unresisted and with hoysed-full sailes. Moreover, my fortune having enured and allured me, even from my

infancie, to one sole-singular and perfect amitie, hath verilie, in some sorte, distasted me from others: and over-deepelie imprinted in my fantasie, that it is a beast sociable and for company, and not of troupe, as sayde an ancient writer. So that it is naturallie a paine unto me, to communicate my selfe by halves, and with modification; and that servile or suspicious wisdome, which in the conversation of these numerous and imperfect amities, is ordained and proposed unto us: Prescribed in these dayes especiallie, *Wherein one cannot speake of the world, but dangerouslie or falselie*. Yet I see, that who (as I doe) makes for his ende, the commodities of his lyfe (I meane essentiall commodities) must avoyde as a plague, these difficulties and quaintnesse of humour.

I should commend a high-raised minde, that could both bende and discharge it selfe: that where-ever hir fortune might transporte hir, shee might continue constant: that could discourse with hir neyghbour of all matters, as of hir building, of hir hunting and of any quarrell; and entertaine with delight a Carpenter or a Gardiner. I envye those which can bee familiar with the meanest of their followers, and vouchafe to contract friendship, and frame discourse with their owne servantes. Nor doe I like the advise of *Plato*, ever to speake imperiously unto our attendants, without blithnesse and sance any familiaritie: bee it to men or women servants. For, besides my reason, it is inhumanitie, and injustice, to attribute so much unto that prerogative of fortune: and the government, where lesse inequality is permitted betweene the servant and mayster, is, in my conceite the more indifferent. Some others studie to rouze and raise their minde; but I to abase and prostrate mine: it is not faultie but in extension.

*Narras et genus Æaci,
Et pugnata sacro bella sub Ilio,
Quo Chium pretio cadum
Mercemur, quis aquam temperet ignibus,
Quo præbente domum, et quota
Pelignis caream frigoribus, taces.*

*You tell of Æacus the pedegree;
The warres at sacred Troye you doe display,
You tell not at what price a hogs-head we
May buie of the best Wine; who shall allaye
Wine-fire with water; at whose house to holde.
At what a-clock, I may be kept from colde.*

Even as the Lacedemonian valoure had neede of moderation, and of sweete and pleasing soundes of Flutes, to flatter and allaye it in time of warre, least it should runne head-long into rashnesse and furye: whereas all other nations use commonlye pearcing soundes and stronge shoutes, which violentlie excite, and enflame their souldyers courage: so thinke I (against ordinarye custome) that in the employment of our spirite, wee have for the most parte more need of leade then winges; of coldenesse and quiet, then of heate and agitation. Above all, in my minde, *The onely way to playe the foole well, is to seeme wise among fooles*: to speake as-though ones tongue were ever bent to Favellar' in punta di forchetta, *To syllabize or speake minzinglie*. One must lende him-selfe unto those hee is with, and sometimes affect ignorance: Set force and subiltie aside; In common

employments 'tis enough to reserve order; dragge your selfe even close to the ground, if they will have it so. The learned stumble willinglie on this blocke; making continuall muster, and open showe of their skill, and dispersing their bookes abroad: And have in these dayes so filled the closets, and possessed the eares of Ladyes, that if they retayne not their substance, at least they have theyr countenance: using in all sortes of discourse and subject, how base or popular so-ever, a newe, an affected and learned fashion of speaking and writing.

*Hoc sermone pauent, hoc iram gaudia, curas,
Hoc cuncta effundunt animi secreta, quid ultra?
Concumbunt docte.*

*They in this language feare, in this they fashion
Their joyes, their cares, their rage, their inward passion;
What more? they learned are in copulation.*

And alleadge *Plato*, and *Saint Thomas* for things, which the first man they meete would decide as well, and stand for as good a witnesse. Such learning as could not enter into their minde, hath staide on their tongues. If the well-borne will give any credit unto me, they shall be pleased to make their owne and naturall ritches to prevaile and be of worth: They hide and shrowd theyr formes under forraine and borrowed beauties: *It is great simplicitie, for any body to smoothen and conceale his owne brightness, to shine with a borrowed light:* They are buried and entombed under the Arte of *CAPSULA TOTÆ*, It is because they doe not sufficiently know them-selves: the world containes nothing of more beautie: It is for them to honour Artes, and to bewtifie embellishment. What neede they more then to live beloved and honoured? They have, and know but too much in that matter. There needs but a little rousing and enflaming of the faculties that are in them.

When I see them medling with Rhetoricke, with Lawe, and with Logicke, and such like trashe, so vayne and unprofitable for theyr use; I enter into feare, that those who advise them to such things, doe it, that they may have more lawe to governe or collour them under that title or pretence. For, what other excuse can I devise for them? It is sufficient, that without us, they may frame, or roule the grace of their eyes, unto cheerefulnesse, unto severitie, and unto mildenesse: and season a *No* with frowardnesse, with doubt and with favoure; and require not an interpretor in discourses made for their service. With this learning they commaund with-out controule, and over-rule both Regents and Schooles. Yet if it offend them to yeelde us any preheminance, and would for curiositie sake have parte in bookes also: Poesye is a studie fitte for their purpose: being a wanton, ammusung, subtile, disguised, and pratling Arte; all in delight, all in showe, like to them-selves. They may also select diverse commodities out of Historye. In *Morrall Philosophie*, they may take the discourses which enable them to judge of our humoures, and censure our conditions, and to avoyde our guiles and treacheries;¹ to moderate theyr libertie: lengthen the delightes of lyfe; gentlye to beare the inconstancie of a servant, the peevishnesse or rudenesse of a husband, the importunitie of yeares, the unwellcome of wrinckles, and such like minde-troubling accidents. Loe heare the most and greatest share of

learning I would assigne them. There are some particulare, retired and close dispositions.

My essentiall forme is fitte for communication, and proper for production: I am all outwarde and in apparance; borne for societie and unto friendshippe. The solitude I love and commend, is especialle but to retyre my affections and redeeme my thoughts unto my selfe; to restraine and close up, not my steppes, but my desires and my cares, resigning all forraigne solicitude and trouble, and mortallye shunning all manner of servitude and obligation; and not so much the throng of men as the importunitie of affayres. Locall solitarinesse (to say trueth) doth rather extende and enlarge mee outwardlie; I give my selfe to State-businesse, and to the worlde, more willingly when I am all alone. At the Courte, and in presse of people, I close and slincke into mine owne skinne. Assemblies thrust mee againe into my selfe. And I never entertaine my selfe so fondlye, so licenciously, and so particularlye, as in places of respect, and ceremonious discretion. Our follyes make mee not laughe, but our wisdomes doe. Of mine owne complexion, I am no enemye to the agitations and stirrings of our Courtes: I have there past great parte of my lyfe: and am enured to bee merye in great assemblies; so it bee by intermission, and sutable to my humore. But this tendernesse or coynesse of judgement (whereof I speake) dooth perforce tye mee unto solitarinesse. Yea even in mine owne house, in the middest of a numerous familye and most frequented houses, I see people more then a good manye, but seldome such as I love to converse or communicate with-all. And there I reserve, both for my selfe, and others, an unaccustomed lybertye; making truce with cerimonyes, assistance, and envytyns, and such other troublesome ordynances of our courtesie (Oh servile custome, and importunate manner) there every man demeaneth himselfe as he pleaseth, and entertayneth what his thoughts affect; whereas I keepe my selfe silent, meditating and close, without offence to my guesstes or friendes.

The men whose familiarity and society I hunt after, are those which are called honest, vertuous and sufficient: the image of whome doth distaste and divert me from others. It is (being rightly taken) the rarest of our formes; and a forme or fashion chiefly due unto nature.

The ende or skope of this commerce, is principally and simplye familiarity, conference and frequentation: the exercise of mindes, without other fruite. In our discourses, all subjects are a-like to me: I care not though they want either waight or deapth; grace and pertinencie are never wanting; all therein is tainted with a ripe and constant judgement, and commixt with goodnesse, liberty, cheerefulnesse and kindnesse. It is not onely in the subject of lawes and affaires of Princes, that our spirit sheweth it's beauty, grace and vigor: It sheweth them as much in private conferences. I know my people by their very silence and smyling, and peradventure discover them better at a table, then sitting in serious counsell. *Hippomachus* said, he discerned good wrestlers but by seeing them march through a streete. If learning vouchsafe to step into our talke, she shall not be refused; yet must not she be sterne, maistring, imperious and importunate, as commonly she is; but assistant, and docile of hir selfe. Therein we seeke for nothing but recreation and pastime: when we shall looke to be instructed, taught and resolved, we

will go seeke and sue to her in her throane. Let her if she please keepe from us at that time; for, as commodious and pleasing as she is: I presume that for a neede we could spare her presence, and doe our businesse well enough without her. Wits well borne, soundly bred and exercised in the practise and commerce of men, become gracious and plausible of themselves. Arte is but the checke-roule and register of the productions uttered, and conceites produced by them.

The company of faire, and society of honest women is likewise a sweete commerce for me: *Nam nos quoque oculos eruditos habemus, for wee also have learned eyes.* If the minde have not so much to solace her selfe, as in the former; the corporall sences, whose part is more in the second, bring it to a proportion neere unto the other; although in myne opinion not equall. But it is a society wherein it behooveth a man somewhat to stand upon his garde; and especially those that are of a strong constitution, and whose body can doe much, as in me. In my youth I heated my selfe therein and was very violent; and endured all the rages and furious assaults, which Poets say happen to those who without order or discretion abandone themselves over-loosly and ryotously unto it. True it is indeede, that the same lash hath since stooode me insteade of an instruction.

*Quicumque Argolica de classe Capharea fugit,
Semper ab Euboicis uela retorquet aquis.*

*Greeke Sailers that Capharean rocks did fly,
From the Eubœan Sease their sailes still ply.*

It is folly to fasten all ones thoughts upon it, and with a furious and indiscreete affection to engage himselfe unto it: But on the other side, to meddle with it without love or bond of affection, as Comediants doe, to play a common parte of age and manners, without ought of their owne but bare-conned wordes, is verilye a provision for ones safety: and yet but a cowardlye one; as is that of him, who woulde forgoe his honour, his profit or his pleasure for feare of danger; for it is certayne that the practisers of such courses, cannot hope for any fruite able to moove or satisfie a worthy minde.

One must very earnestly have desired that, whereof he would enjoy an absolute delight: I meane, though fortune should unjustly favour their intention: which often hapneth because there is no woman, how deformed and unhandsome soever, but thinks her selfe lovely, amiable and prayse-worthye, eyther for her age, her haire or gate (for there are generally no more faire then foule ones) And the *Brachmanian* maydes wanting other commendations; by proclamation for that purpose, made shew of their matrimoniall partes unto the people assembled, to see if thereby at least they might get them husbands. By consequence there is not one of them, but upon the first oath one maketh to serve her, will very easily be perswaded to thinke well of her selfe. Now this common treason and ordinary protestations of men in these dayes, must needs produce the effects, experience already discovereth: which is, that either they joyne together, and cast away themselves on themselves, to avoyde us, or on their side follow also the example we give them; acting their part of the play, without passion; without care, and without love, lending themselves to this entercourse: *Neque affectui suo aut alieno obnoxia: Neither*

lyable to their owne nor other folkes affection. Thinking, according to *Lysias* persuasiōs in *Plato*, they may so much the more profitably and commodiously yeeld unto us; by how much lesse we love them: Wherein it will happen as in Commedies, the spectators shall have as much or more pleasure, as the Commedianes. For my part I no more acknowledge *Venus* without *Cupid*, then a motherhood without an offspring: They are things which enter-lend and enter-owe one another their essence. Thus doth this cozonage rebound on him that useth it; and as it costes him little so gets he not much by it. Those which made *Venus* a Godesse have respected that her principall beauty was incorporeall and spirituall. But she whom these kinde of people hunt-after, is not so much as humane, nor also brutall; but such as wilde beasts, would not have her so filthy and terrestriall. We see that imagination enflames them, and desire or lust urgeth them, before the body: We see in one and other sexe, even in whole herdes, choise and distinctions in their affections, and amongst themselves acquaintances of long continued good-will and liking. And even those to whom age denyeth bodily strength, doe yet bray, neygh, roare, skip and wince for love. Before the deed we see them full of hope and heate; and when the body hath plaide his part, even tickle and tingle themselves with the sweetnesse of that remembrance: some of them swell with pride at parting from it, others all weary and glutted, ring out songs of glee and triumph. Who makes no more of it but to discharge his body of some naturall necessity, hath no cause to trouble others with so curious preparation. *It is no foode for a greedy and clounish hunger.* As one that would not be accompted better then I am, thus much I will display of my youthes wanton-errors: Not onely for the danger of ones health that followes that game (yet could I not avoide two, though light and cursory assaults) but also for contempt, I have not much bene given to mercenary and common acquaintances. I have coveted to set an edge on that sensuall pleasure by difficulty, by desire and for some glory. And liked *Tiberius* his fashions, who in his amours was swaide as much by modesty and noblenesse, as by any other qualitie. And *Floras* humour, who would prostitute her selfe to none worse then Dictators, Consuls, or Senators, and tooke delight in the dignity and greatnesse of her lovers, doeth some-what sute with mine. Surely glittering Pearles, and Silken cloathes adde some-thing unto it, and so doe titles, nobility and a worthy traine. Besides which, I made high esteeme of the minde, yet so as the body might not justly be found fault withall: For, to speake my conscience, if either of the two beauties were necessarily to bee wanting, I would rather have chosen to want the mental, whose use is to be employed in better things. But in the subject of love; a subject that chiefly hath reference unto the two senses of seeing and touching, some thing may be done without the graces of the minde, but little or nothing without the corporall. *Beauty is the true availefull advantage of women:* It is so peculiarly theirs, that ours though it require some features and different allurements, is not in her right kue, or true byas, unlesse confused with theirs; childish and beardlesse. It is reported, that such as serve the great *Turke* under the title of beauty, (whereof the number is infinite) are dismissed at furthest when they once come to the age of two and twenty yeares. *Discourse, discretion, together with the offices of true amitty, are better found amongst men: and therefore governe they the worldes affaires.* These two commerces or societies are accidentall and depending of others; the one is troublesome and tedious for it's rarity; the other withers with olde age: nor could they have

sufficiently provided for my lives necessities. That of bookes, which is the third, is much more solid-sure and much more ours; some other advantages it yeeldeth to the two former; but hath for her share constancie and the facility of her service. This accosteth and secondeth all my course, and every where assisteth me: It comforts mee in age, and solaceth me in solitarinesse: It easeth me of the burthen of a weary-some sloath; and at all times rids me of tedious companies; it abateth the edge of fretting sorrow, on condition it be not extreame and over insolent. *To divert me from any importunate imagination or insinuating conceite, there is no better way then to have recourse unto bookes:* with ease they allure me to them, and with facility they remoove them all. And though they perceive I neither frequent nor seeke them, but wanting other more essentiall, lively and more naturall commodities, they never mutinie or murmur at me; but still entertaine me with one and selfe-same visage. *He may well walke a foot, that leades his horse by the bridle,* saith the proverbe. And our *James* king of *Naples* and *Sicilie*, who being faire, young, healthy and in good plight, caused himselfe to be caried abroad in a plaine wagon or skreene, lying upon an homely pillow of course feathers, cloathed in a sute of homespunne gray, and a bonet of the same, yet royally attended on by a gallant troupe of Nobles, of Litters, Coches, and of all sorts of choice led-horses, a number of gentlemen, and officers, represented a tender and wavering austerity. *The sycke man is not to be moaned, that hath his health in his sleeve.* In the experience and use of this sentence, which is most true, consisteth all the commodity I reape of bookes. In effect I make no other use of them, then those who know them not. I enjoy them, as a myser doth his golde; to know, that I may enjoy them when I list; my minde is setled and satisfied with the right of possession. I never travell without bookes, nor in peace nor in warre; yet doe I passe many dayes and monethes without using them. It shall be anon, say I or to morrow, or when I please; in the meane while the time runnes away, and passeth without hurting me. For it is wonderfull, what repose I take, and how I continue in this consideration, that they are at my elbow to delight me when time shall serve: and in acknowledging what assistance they give unto my life. This is the best munition I have found in this humane peregrination; and I extremely bewaile those men of understanding that want the same. I accept with better will all otehr kinds of amusements, how slight soever, forsomuch as this cannot faile me. At home I betake me somewhat the oftner to my Librarie, whence all at once I command and survay all my houshold; It is seated in the chiefe entrie of my house, thence I beholde under me my garden, my base court, my yarde, and looke even into most roomes of my house. There without order, without methode, and by piece-meales I turne-over and ransacke, now one booke and now another. Sometimes I muse and rave; and walking up and downe I endite and enregister these my humours, these my conceits. It is placed on the third storie of a towre. The lower-most, is my chapell; the second a chamber with other lodgings, where I often lye, because I would be alone. Above it is a great ward-robe. It was in times past the most unprofitable place of all my house. There I passe the greatest part of my lives dayes, and weare out most houres of the day. I am never there a nights: Next unto it is a handsome neate cabinet, able and large enough to receive fire in winter, and very pleasantly windowed. And if I feared not care, more then cost; (care which drives and diverts me from all businesse) I might easilie joyne a convenient gallerie of a hundred paces long, and twelve broad, on each side of it, and

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NOTES

- 1 Later editions have *to temper the rashness of their own desires, to husband their liberty....*