

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 15

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Difficulty Increases Our Desire

There is no reason that has not its contrary, say the wisest of the philosophers. I was just now ruminating on the excellent saying one of the ancients alleges for the contempt of life: "No good can bring pleasure, unless it be that for the loss of which we are beforehand prepared." *In æquo est dolor amissæ rei, et timor amittendæ*, meaning by this that the fruition of life cannot be truly pleasant to us if we are in fear of losing it. It might, however, be said, on the contrary, that we hug and embrace this good so much the more earnestly, and with so much greater affection, by how much we see it the less assured and fear to have it taken from us: for it is evident, as fire burns with greater fury when cold comes to mix with it, that our will is more obstinate by being opposed:

*Si nunquam Danaen habuisset ahenæ turris,
Non esses, Danæ, de Iove facta parens;*

and that there is nothing naturally so contrary to our taste as satiety which proceeds from facility; nor anything that so much whets it as rarity and difficulty: *Omnium rerum voluptas ipso, quo debet fugare, periculo crescit.*

Galla, nega; satiatur amor, nisi gaudia torquent.

To keep love in breath, Lycurgus made a decree that the married people of Lacedaemon should never enjoy one another but by stealth; and that it should be as great a shame to take them in bed together as committing with others. The difficulty of assignations, the danger of surprise, the shame of the morning,

*Et languor, et silentium,
Et latere petitus imo spiritus,*

these are what give the piquancy to the sauce. How many very wantonly pleasant sports spring from the most decent and modest language of the works on love?

The grief of losing a thing, and the fear of losing it, are equal, • SEN., EP., 98

If a brazen tower had not held Danae, you would not, Danae, have been made a mother by Jove. • OV., AM., 2.19.27

The pleasure of all things increases by the same danger that should deter it. • SEN., BEN., 7.9

Galla, refuse me; love is glutted with joys that are not attended with trouble. • MART., 4.37

And languor, and silence, and sighs, coming from the innermost heart. • HOR., EPOD., 11.9

Pleasure itself seeks to be heightened with pain; it is much sweeter when it smarts and has the skin rippled. The courtesan Flora said she never lay with Pompey but that she made him wear the prints of her teeth.

*Quod petiere, premunt arcte, faciuntque dolorem
corporis et dentes inlidunt sæpe labellis
Et stimuli subsunt, qui instigant lædere ad ipsum,
Quodcunque est, rabies unde illæ germina surgunt.*

And so it is in everything: difficulty gives all things their estimation.

The people of the march of Ancona more readily make their vows to St. James, and those of Galicia to Our Lady of Loreto; they make wonderful to-do at Liege about the baths of Lucca, and in Tuscany about those of Aspa: there are few Romans seen in the fencing school of Rome, which is full of French. That great Cato also, as much as us, nauseated his wife whilst she was his, and longed for her when in the possession of another.

I was fain to turn out into the paddock an old horse, as he was not to be governed when he smelt a mare: the facility presently sated him as toward his own, but toward strange mares, and the first that passed by the pale of his pasture, he would again fall to his importunate neighings and his furious heats as before.

Our appetite contemns and passes by what it has in possession, to run after that it has not:

Transvolat in medio posita, et fugientia captat.

To forbid us anything is to make us have a mind to it:

*nisi tu servare puellam
Incipis, incipiet desinere esse mea.*

to give it wholly up to us is to beget in us contempt. Want and abundance fall into the same inconvenience,

Tibi quod superest, mihi quod desit, dolet.

Desire and fruition equally afflict us. The rigors of mistresses are troublesome, but facility, to say truth, still more so; forasmuch as discontent and anger spring from the esteem we have of the thing desired, heat and actuate love, but satiety begets disgust; 'tis a blunt, dull, stupid, tired, and slothful passion.

Si qua volet regnare diu, contemnat amantem.

*contemnite, amantes,
Sic hodie veniet, si qua negavit heri.*

Why did Poppea invent the use of a mask to hide the beauties of her face, but to enhance it to her lovers? Why have they veiled, even below the heels,

What they have sought they dress closely, and cause pain; on the lips fix the teeth, and every kiss indents: urged by latent stimulus the part to wound. • LUCR., 4.1079

He slights her who is close at hand, and runs after her who flees from him. • HOR., SAT., 1.2.108

Unless you begin to guard your mistress, she will soon begin to be no longer mine. • OV., AM., 2.19.47

Your superfluities trouble you, and what I want troubles me. • TER., PHORM., 1.3.9

She who would long retain her power must use her lover ill. • OV., AM., 2.19.33

Slight your mistress; she will today come who denied you yesterday. • PROP., 2.14.19

those beauties that every one desires to show, and that every one desires to see? Why do they cover with so many hindrances, one over another, the parts where our desires and their own have their principal seat? And to what serve those great bastion farthingales, with which our ladies fortify their haunches, but to allure our appetite and to draw us on by removing them farther from us?

Et fugit ad salices, et se cupit ante videri.

Interdum tunica duxit operata moram.

To what use serves the artifice of this virgin modesty, this grave coldness, this severe countenance, this professing to be ignorant of things that they know better than we who instruct them in them, but to increase in us the desire to overcome, control, and trample underfoot at pleasure all this ceremony and all these obstacles? For there is not only pleasure, but, moreover, glory, in conquering and debauching that soft sweetness and that childish modesty, and to reduce a cold and matronlike gravity to the mercy of our ardent desires: 'tis a glory, say they, to triumph over modesty, chastity, and temperance; and whoever dissuades ladies from those qualities, betrays both them and himself. We are to believe that their hearts tremble with affright, that the very sound of our words offends the purity of their ears, that they hate us for talking so, and only yield to our importunity by a compulsive force. Beauty, all powerful as it is, has not wherewithal to make itself relished without the mediation of these little arts. Look into Italy, where there is the most and the finest beauty to be sold, how it is necessitated to have recourse to extrinsic means and other artifices to render itself charming, and yet, in truth, whatever it may do, being venal and public, it remains feeble and languishing. Even so in virtue itself, of two like effects, we notwithstanding look upon that as the fairest and most worthy, wherein the most trouble and hazard are set before us.

'Tis an effect of the divine Providence to suffer the holy Church to be afflicted, as we see it, with so many storms and troubles, by this opposition to rouse pious souls, and to awaken them from that drowsy lethargy wherein, by so long tranquillity, they had been immersed. If we should lay the loss we have sustained in the number of those who have gone astray, in the balance against the benefit we have had by being again put in breath, and by having our zeal and strength revived by reason of this opposition, I know not whether the utility would not surmount the damage.

We have thought to tie the nuptial knot of our marriages more fast and firm by having taken away all means of dissolving it, but the knot of the will and affection is so much the more slackened and made loose, by how much that of constraint is drawn closer; and, on the contrary, that which kept the marriages at Rome so long in honor and inviolate, was the liberty every one who so desired had to break them; they kept their wives the better, because they might part with them, if they would; and, in the full liberty of divorce, five hundred years and more passed away before any one made use on it.

Quod licet, ingratum est; quod non licet, acrius urit.

She flies to the osiers, and desires beforehand to be seen going. • VERG., ECL., 3.65

The hidden robe has sometimes checked love. • PROP., 2.15.6

What you may, is displeasing; what is

We might here introduce the opinion of an ancient upon this occasion, “that executions rather whet than dull the edge of vices: that they do not beget the care of doing well, that being the work of reason and discipline, but only a care not to be taken in doing ill:”

Latius excisæ pestis contagia serpunt.

I do not know that this is true; but I experimentally know, that never civil government was by that means reformed; the order and regimen of manners depend upon some other expedient.

The Greek histories make mention of the Argippians, neighbors to Scythia, who live without either rod or stick for offense; where not only no one attempts to attack them, but whoever can fly thither is safe, by reason of their virtue and sanctity of life, and no one is so bold as to lay hands upon them; and they have applications made to them to determine the controversies that arise betwixt men of other countries.

There is a certain nation, where the enclosures of gardens and fields they would preserve, are made only of a string of cotton; and, so fenced, is more firm and secure than by our hedges and ditches.

Furem signata sollicitant. Aperta effractarius præterit. Peradventure, the facility of entering my house, among other things, has been a means to preserve it from the violence of our civil wars: defense allures attempt, and defiance provokes an enemy. I enervated the soldiers’ design by depriving the exploit of danger and all manner of military glory, which is wont to serve them for pretense and excuse: whatever is bravely, is ever honorably, done, at a time when justice is dead. I render them the conquest of my house cowardly and base; it is never shut to any one that knocks; my gate has no other guard than a porter, and he of ancient custom and ceremony; who does not so much serve to defend it as to offer it with more decorum and grace; I have no other guard nor sentinel than the stars.

A gentleman would play the fool to make a show of defense, if he be not really in a condition to defend himself. He who lies open on one side, is everywhere so; our ancestors did not think of building frontier garrisons. The means of assaulting, I mean without battery or army, and of surprising our houses, increases every day more and more beyond the means to guard them; men’s wits are generally bent that way; in invasion every one is concerned: none but the rich in defense. Mine was strong for the time when it was built; I have added nothing to it of that kind, and should fear that its strength might turn against myself; to which we are to consider that a peaceable time would require it should be dismantled. There is danger never to be able to regain it, and it would be very hard to keep; for in intestine dissensions, your man may be of the party you fear; and where religion is the pretext, even a man’s nearest relations become unreliable, with some color of justice. The public exchequer will not maintain our domestic garrisons; they would exhaust it: we ourselves have not the means to do it without ruin, or, which is more inconvenient and injurious, without ruining the people. The condition of my loss would be scarcely worse. As to the rest, you there lose all; and even your friends will

forbidden, whets the appetite. • OV., AM., 2.19

The plague-sore being lanced, the infection spreads all the more. • RUT. NAMAT., 1.397

Things sealed, up invite a thief: the housebreaker passes by open doors. • SEN., EP., 68

be more ready to accuse your want of vigilance and your improvidence, and your ignorance of and indifference to your own business, than to pity you. That so many garrisoned houses have been undone whereas this of mine remains, makes me apt to believe that they were only lost by being guarded; this gives an enemy both an invitation and color of reason; all defense shows a face of war. Let who will come to me in God's name; but I shall not invite them; 'tis the retirement I have chosen for my repose from war. I endeavor to withdraw this corner from the public tempest, as I also do another corner in my soul. Our war may put on what forms it will, multiply and diversify itself into new parties; for my part, I stir not. Among so many garrisoned houses, myself alone among those of my rank, so far as I know, in France, have trusted purely to Heaven for the protection of mine, and have never removed plate, deeds, or hangings. I will neither fear nor save myself by halves. If a full acknowledgment acquires the Divine favor, it will stay with me to the end: if not, I have still continued long enough to render my continuance remarkable and fit to be recorded. How? Why, there are thirty years that I have thus lived.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Hor., Epod.	Horace, <i>Epodes</i>
Hor., Sat.	Horace, <i>Satires</i>
Lucr.	Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i>
Mart.	Martial, <i>Epigrams</i>
Ov., Am.	Ovid, <i>Amores</i>
Prop.	Propertius, <i>Elegies</i>
Rut. Namat.	Rutilius Namatianus, <i>De Reditu Suo</i>
Sen., Ben.	Seneca, <i>De Beneficiis</i>
Sen., Ep.	Seneca, <i>Epistles</i>
Ter., Phorm.	Terence, <i>Phormio</i>
Verg., Ecl.	Virgil, <i>Eclogues</i>