Michel de Montaigne

Essays

Book 1 · Chapter 4

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How the Soul Releases Its Emotions on False Objects When Real Ones Are Missing

a One of our gentlemen, terribly afflicted with gout and pressed by doctors to give up all salted meats, used to quip that, tormented and tested by the disease, he wanted to have something to blame and that yelling and cursing at either sausage, beef tongue, or ham made him feel better. In truth, see how frustrated we get when we raise an arm to strike only to swing and miss; also how a view is made beautiful not when it wanders and stretches out into a boundless sky but when it finds an edge to frame it at a good distance from us.

b *Uentus ut amittit uires, nisi robore densae*
Occurrant siluae, spatio diffusus inani;

As the wind loses its force not when it blows against dense oak forests but spread out in empty space. • Luc., 3.362

a Likewise, it seems that the soul, when it is troubled and moved, is lost on its own and with nothing to get hold of. It should always be given some object to butt up against and act on. Plutarch says about those who develop a passion for pet monkeys and little dogs that it is the loving part in us which, deprived of a legitimate object, and rather than remain unused, makes up a false and frivolous one instead. And so we see that a soul driven by emotions will rather deceive itself, creating something fake and illusive, even if it does not believe in it, than not act against something.

b Thus the rage of animals attacking the stone or blade that wounded them or biting themselves to get back at what hurts them.

b *Pannonis haud aliter, post ictum saeuior ursa,*
Cui iaculum parua Libys amentauit habena,
Se rotat in uulnus, telumque irata receptum
Impetit, et secum fugientem circuit hastam.

Without fail, the Pannonian bear, enraged after being hit by the javelin the Libyan launched with a small throwing strap, turns around toward the wound, angrily rushes at the weapon lodged in her, and goes around and around chasing the shaft that follows her. • Luc., 6.220

a What reasons will we not invent for the hardships that befall us? What will we not blame, right or wrong, to have something to fight with? Neither those blond braids you chop off nor this pale chest you beat so cruelly in despair made that stray bullet hit your beloved brother. Blame lies elsewhere. c Livy speaking about the Roman army in Spain, after the loss of these brothers, two of its great officers: *flere omnes repente, et*

All suddenly crying and beating

offensare capita; a common practice. And Bion, the philosopher, who quipped about this bereaved king who was pulling his hair out: "Does he think baldness cures grief?"[1] [a] Have you never seen someone chew up and swallow playing cards, gulp a bunch of dice to make something pay for the loss of their money? Xerxes whipped the [c] Hellespont [a] sea, [a] burnt it with hot irons, abused it in a thousand ways; he challenged Mount Athos to a fight; Cyrus employed an entire army for several days to punish the Gyndes river for the fright it gave him while crossing it; and Caligula ruined a very fine villa for the pleasure his mother had of staying there.

their heads. • Livy, 25.37

[c] People used to say when I was young that a neighboring king of ours who had gotten a beating from God had sworn revenge for it and, for the next ten years, had forbidden anyone to pray to Him, to speak to Him, or, as far as this was under his control, to believe in Him. The point was to show not the silliness so much as the characteristic pride of the nation in question. In truth, this behavior has more to do with arrogance than stupidity, although those flaws always come in pairs.

[a] Caesar Augustus, thwarted by a storm at sea, resolved to defy Neptune and, to take his revenge, had his effigy removed from among those of all the gods in the game ceremonies of the circus. In this case, he is even less forgivable than others in previous cases, and less so than he was afterward when, having lost a battle led by Quintilius Varus in Germany, he beat his head against a wall in rage and despair shouting: "Varus, give me back my soldiers!" For those who speak directly to God or Fortune — as if she had ears to suffer our abuse — are the most foolish of all, the more so for being impious as well, [c] like the Thracians who start shooting arrows at the sky when thunder rumbles or lightning strikes to pacify God with their infernal retaliation. [a] As this ancient poet says in Plutarch,[2] however,

[a] *Point ne se faut couroucer aux affaires,*
Il ne leur chault de toutes nos choleres.

Better not to fight in business; they do not care for our arguments.

[b] But we will never enough curse the nonsense our minds are capable of.

Notes

1 Related in Cicero, *Tusc.*, 3.26

2 In Plutarch, *On the Control of Anger.*

Montaigne's Sources

Livy	Livy, *History of Rome*

Luc. Lucan, *Civil War*