

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 3 · Chapter 10

Translation by Charles Cotton (1685, Public domain) · Last updated on June 18, 2026

HYPERESSAYS is a project to create a modern and accessible online edition of the *Essays* of Michel de Montaigne. More information at www.hyperessays.net

ESSAYS-3-10-20260831-212313

On Conserving One's Will

Few things, in comparison of what commonly affect other men, move, or, to say better, possess me: for 'tis but reason they should concern a man, provided they do not possess him. I am very solicitous, both by study and argument, to enlarge this privilege of insensibility, which is in me naturally raised to a pretty degree, so that consequently I espouse and am very much moved with very few things. I have a clear sight enough, but I fix it upon very few objects; I have a sense delicate and tender enough; but an apprehension and application hard and negligent. I am very unwilling to engage myself; as much as in me lies, I employ myself wholly on myself, and even in that subject should rather choose to curb and restrain my affection from plunging itself over head and ears into it, it being a subject that I possess at the mercy of others, and over which fortune has more right than I; so that even as to health, which I so much value, 'tis all the more necessary for me not so passionately to covet and heed it, than to find diseases so insupportable. A man ought to moderate himself betwixt the hatred of pain and the love of pleasure: and Plato sets down a middle path of life betwixt the two.

But against such affections as wholly carry me away from myself and fix me elsewhere, against those, I say, I oppose myself with my utmost power. 'Tis my opinion that a man should lend himself to others, and only give himself to himself. Were my will easy to lend itself out and to be swayed, I should not stick there; I am too tender both by nature and use,

fugax rerum, securaque in otia natus.

Hot and obstinate disputes, wherein my adversary would at last have the better, the issue that would render my heat and obstinacy disgraceful would peradventure vex me to the last degree. Should I set myself to it at the rate that others do, my soul would never have the force to bear the emotion and alarms of those who grasp at so much; it would immediately be disordered by this inward agitation. If, sometimes, I have been put upon the management of other men's affairs, I have promised to take them in hand, but not into my lungs and liver; to take them upon me, not to

Avoiding affairs and born to secure ease. • OV., TRI., 3.2.9

incorporate them; to take pains, yes: to be impassioned about it, by no means; I have a care of them, but I will not sit upon them. I have enough to do to order and govern the domestic throng of those that I have in my own veins and bowels, without introducing a crowd of other men's affairs; and am sufficiently concerned about my own proper and natural business, without meddling with the concerns of others. Such as know how much they owe to themselves, and how many offices they are bound to of their own, find that nature has cut them out work enough of their own to keep them from being idle. "Thou hast business enough at home: look to that."

Men let themselves out to hire; their faculties are not for themselves, but for those to whom they have enslaved themselves; 'tis their tenants occupy them, not themselves. This common humor pleases not me. We must be thrifty of the liberty of our souls, and never let it out but upon just occasions, which are very few, if we judge aright. Do but observe such as have accustomed themselves to be at every one's call: they do it indifferently upon all, as well little as great, occasions; in that which nothing concerns them; as much as in what imports them most. They thrust themselves in indifferently wherever there is work to do and obligation, and are without life when not in tumultuous bustle. *In negotiis sunt, negotii causa*. It is not so much that they will go, as it is that they cannot stand still: like a rolling stone that cannot stop till it can go no further. Occupation, with a certain sort of men, is a mark of understanding and dignity: their souls seek repose in agitation, as children do by being rocked in a cradle; they may pronounce themselves as serviceable to their friends, as they are troublesome to themselves. No one distributes his money to others, but every one distributes his time and his life: there is nothing of which we are so prodigal as of these two things, of which to be thrifty would be both commendable and useful.

They are in business for business's sake. • SEN., EP., 22

I am of a quite contrary humor; I look to myself, and commonly covet with no great ardor what I do desire, and desire little; and I employ and busy myself at the same rate, rarely and temperately. Whatever they take in hand, they do it with their utmost will and vehemence. There are so many dangerous steps, that, for the more safety, we must a little lightly and superficially glide over the world, and not rush through it. Pleasure itself is painful in profundity:

*incedis per ignes,
Suppositos cineri doloso.*

You walk over fires still burning
beneath the treacherous ash. • HOR.,
CARM., 2.1.7

The Parliament of Bordeaux chose me mayor of their city at a time when I was at a distance from France, and still more remote from any such thought. I entreated to be excused, but I was told by my friends that I had committed an error in so doing, and the greater because the king had, moreover, interposed his command in that affair. 'Tis an office that ought to be looked upon so much more honorable, as it has no other salary nor advantage than the bare honor of its execution. It continues two years, but may be extended by a second election, which very rarely happens; it was to me, and had never been so but twice before: some years ago to Monsieur de Lansac, and lately to Monsieur de Biron, Marshal of France, in whose

place I succeeded; and, I left mine to Monsieur de Matignon, Marshal of France also: proud of so noble a fraternity,

uterque bonus pacis bellique minister.

Either one a good minister in peace
and war. • VERG., AEN., 11.658

Fortune would have a hand in my promotion, by this particular circumstance which she put in of her own, not altogether vain; for Alexander disdained the ambassadors of Corinth, who came to offer him a burgess-ship of their city; but when they proceeded to lay before him that Bacchus and Hercules were also in the register, he graciously thanked them.

At my arrival, I faithfully and conscientiously represented myself to them for such as I find myself to be—a man without memory, without vigilance, without experience, and without vigor; but withal, without hatred, without ambition, without avarice, and without violence; that they might be informed of my qualities, and know what they were to expect from my service. And whereas the knowledge they had had of my late father, and the honor they had for his memory, had alone incited them to confer this favor upon me, I plainly told them that I should be very sorry anything should make so great an impression upon me as their affairs and the concerns of their city had made upon him, whilst he held the government to which they had preferred me. I remembered, when a boy, to have seen him in his old age cruelly tormented with these public affairs, neglecting the soft repose of his own house, to which the declension of his age had reduced him for several years before, the management of his own affairs, and his health; and certainly despising his own life, which was in great danger of being lost, by being engaged in long and painful journeys on their behalf. Such was he; and this humor of his proceeded from a marvellous good nature; never was there a more charitable and popular soul. Yet this proceeding which I commend in others, I do not love to follow myself, and am not without excuse. He had learned that a man must forget himself for his neighbor, and that the particular was of no manner of consideration in comparison with the general.

Most of the rules and precepts of the world run this way; to drive us out of ourselves into the street for the benefit of public society; they thought to do a great feat to divert and remove us from ourselves, assuming we were but too much fixed there, and by a too natural inclination; and have said all they could to that purpose: for 'tis no new thing for the sages to preach things as they serve, not as they are. Truth has its obstructions, inconveniences, and incompatibilities with us; we must often deceive that we may not deceive ourselves; and shut our eyes and our understandings to redress and amend them. *Imperiti enim iudicant, et qui frequenter in hoc ipsum fallendi sunt, ne errent.* When they order us to love three, four, or fifty degrees of things above ourselves, they do like archers, who, to hit the white, take their aim a great deal higher than the butt; to make a crooked stick straight, we bend it the contrary way.

For the ignorant judge, and therefore
are oft to be deceived, less they
should err. • QUINT., INST., 11.17

I believe that in the Temple of Pallas, as we see in all other religions, there were apparent mysteries to be exposed to the people; and others, more secret and high, that were only to be shown to such as were professed; 'tis likely that in these the true point of friendship that every one owes to

himself is to be found; not a false friendship, that makes us embrace glory, knowledge, riches, and the like, with a principal and immoderate affection, as members of our being; nor an indiscreet and effeminate friendship, wherein it happens, as with ivy, that it decays and ruins the walls it embraces; but a sound and regular friendship, equally useful and pleasant. He who knows the duties of this friendship and practises them is truly of the cabinet of the Muses, and has attained to the height of human wisdom and of our happiness, such an one, exactly knowing what he owes to himself, will on his part find that he ought to apply to himself the use of the world and of other men; and to do this, to contribute to public society the duties and offices appertaining to him. He who does not in some sort live for others, does not live much for himself. *Qui sibi amicus est, scito hunc amicum omnibus esse.* The principal charge we have is, to every one his own conduct; and 'tis for this only that we here are. As he who should forget to live a virtuous and holy life, and should think he acquitted himself of his duty in instructing and training others up to it, would be a fool; even so he who abandons his own particular healthful and pleasant living to serve others therewith, takes, in my opinion, a wrong and unnatural course.

I would not that men should refuse, in the employments they take upon them, their attention, pains, eloquence, sweat, and blood if need be:

*non ipse pro caris amicis
Aut patria timidus perire.*

but 'tis only borrowed, and accidentally; his mind being always in repose and in health; not without action, but without vexation, without passion. To be simply acting costs him so little, that he acts even sleeping; but it must be set on going with discretion; for the body receives the offices imposed upon it just according to what they are; the mind often extends and makes them heavier at its own expense, giving them what measure it pleases. Men perform like things with several sorts of endeavor, and different contention of will; the one does well enough without the other; for how many people hazard themselves every day in war without any concern which way it goes; and thrust themselves into the dangers of battles, the loss of which will not break their next night's sleep? and such a man may be at home, out of the danger which he dared not have looked upon, who is more passionately concerned for the issue of this war, and whose soul is more anxious about events than the soldier who therein stakes his blood and his life. I could have engaged myself in public employments without quitting my own matters a nail's breadth, and have given myself to others without abandoning myself.

This sharpness and violence of desires more hinder than they advance the execution of what we undertake; fill us with impatience against slow or contrary events, and with heat and suspicion against those with whom we have to do. We never carry on that thing well by which we are prepossessed and led:

*Male cuncta ministrat
Impetus.*

He who is his own friend, is a friend to everybody else. • SEN., EP., 6

Himself not afraid to die for beloved friends, or for his country. • HOR., CARM., 4.9.51

Impulse manages all things ill. • STAT., THEB., 10.704

He who therein employs only his judgment and address proceeds more cheerfully: he counterfeits, he gives way, he defers quite at his ease, according to the necessities of occasions; he fails in his attempt without trouble and affliction, ready and entire for a new enterprise; he always marches with the bridle in his hand. In him who is intoxicated with this violent and tyrannical intention, we discover, of necessity, much imprudence and injustice; the impetuosity of his desire carries him away; these are rash motions, and, if fortune do not very much assist, of very little fruit. Philosophy directs that, in the revenge of injuries received, we should strip ourselves of choler; not that the chastisement should be less, but, on the contrary, that the revenge may be the better and more heavily laid on, which, it conceives, will be by this impetuosity hindered. For anger not only disturbs, but, of itself, also wearies the arms of those who chastise; this fire benumbs and wastes their force; as in precipitation, *festinatio tarda est*, haste trips up its own heels, fetters, and stops itself. *Ipsa se velocitas implicat*. For example, according to what I commonly see, avarice has no greater impediment than itself; the more bent and vigorous it is, the less it rakes together, and commonly sooner grows rich when disguised in a visor of liberality.

rushing is slow, • CURT., HIST., 9

Speed trips itself up. • SEN., EP., 44

A very excellent gentleman, and a friend of mine, ran a risk of impairing his faculties by a too passionate attention and affection to the affairs of a certain prince his master; which master has thus portrayed himself to me; “that he foresees the weight of accidents as well as another, but that in those for which there is no remedy, he presently resolves upon suffering; in others, having taken all the necessary precautions which by the vivacity of his understanding he can presently do, he quietly awaits what may follow.” And, in truth, I have accordingly seen him maintain a great indifference and liberty of actions and serenity of countenance in very great and difficult affairs: I find him much greater, and of greater capacity in adverse than in prosperous fortune; his defeats are to him more glorious than his victories, and his mourning than his triumph.

Consider, that even in vain and frivolous actions, as at chess, tennis, and the like, this eager and ardent engaging with an impetuous desire, immediately throws the mind and members into indiscretion and disorder: a man astounds and hinders himself; he who carries himself more moderately, both toward gain and loss, has always his wits about him; the less peevish and passionate he is at play, he plays much more advantageously and surely.

As to the rest, we hinder the mind's grasp and hold, in giving it so many things to seize upon; some things we should only offer to it; tie it to others, and with others incorporate it. It can feel and discern all things, but ought to feed upon nothing but itself; and should be instructed in what properly concerns itself, and that is properly of its own having and substance. The laws of nature teach us what justly we need. After the sages have told us that no one is indigent according to nature, and that every one is so according to opinion, they very subtly distinguish betwixt the desires that proceed from her, and those that proceed from the disorder of our own fancy: those of which we can see the end are hers; those that fly before us,

and of which we can see no end, are our own: the poverty of goods is easily cured; the poverty of the soul is irreparable.

*Nam si, quod satis est homini, id satis esse potesset
Hoc sat erat: nunc, cum hoc non est, qui credimus porro
Divitias ullas animum mi explere potesse?*

Socrates, seeing a great quantity of riches, jewels, and furniture carried in pomp through his city: "How many things," said he, "I do not desire!" Metrodorus lived on twelve ounces a day, Epicurus upon less; Metrocles slept in winter abroad among sheep, in summer in the cloisters of churches. *Sufficit ad id natura, quod poscit.* Cleanthes lived by the labor of his own hands, and boasted that Cleanthes, if he would, could yet maintain another Cleanthes.

If that which nature exactly and originally requires of us for the conservation of our being be too little (as in truth what it is, and how good cheap life may be maintained, cannot be better expressed than by this consideration, that it is so little that by its littleness it escapes the gripe and shock of fortune), let us allow ourselves a little more; let us call every one of our habits and conditions nature; let us rate and treat ourselves by this measure; let us stretch our appurtenances and accounts so far; for so far, I fancy, we have some excuse. Custom is a second nature, and no less powerful. What is wanting to my custom, I reckon is wanting to me; and I should be almost as well content that they took away my life as cut me short in the way wherein I have so long lived.

I am no longer in condition for any great change, nor to put myself into a new and unwonted course, not even to augmentation. 'Tis past the time for me to become other than what I am; and as I should complain of any great good hap that should now befall me, that it came not in time to be enjoyed:

Quo mihi fortunas, si non conceditur uti?

so should I complain of any inward acquisition. It were almost better never, than so late, to become an honest man, and well fit to live, when one has no longer to live. I, who am about to make my exit out of the world, would easily resign to any newcomer, who should desire it, all the prudence I am now acquiring in the world's commerce; after meat, mustard. I have no need of goods of which I can make no use; of what use is knowledge to him who has lost his head? 'Tis an injury and unkindness in fortune to tender us presents that will only inspire us with a just despite that we had them not in their due season. Guide me no more; I can no longer go. Of so many parts as make up a sufficiency, patience is the most sufficient. Give the capacity of an excellent treble to the chorister who has rotten lungs, and eloquence to a hermit exiled into the deserts of Arabia. There needs no art to help a fall; the end finds itself of itself at the conclusion of every affair. My world is at an end, my form expired; I am totally of the past, and am bound to authorize it, and to conform my outgoing to it.

For if what is for man enough, could be enough, it were enough; but since it is not so, how can I believe that any wealth can give my mind content. • NONIUS, DOC., 5, "MULTUM ET SATIS" (QUOTING LUCILIUS)

Nature suffices for what he requires.
• SEN., EP., 90

What is the good fortune to me, if it is not granted to me to use it? • HOR., EPIST., 1.5.12

I will here declare, by way of example, that the Pope's late ten days' diminution has taken me so aback that I cannot well reconcile myself to it; I belong to the years wherein we kept another kind of account. So ancient and so long a custom challenges my adherence to it, so that I am constrained to be somewhat heretical on that point incapable of any, though corrective, innovation. My imagination, in spite of my teeth, always pushes me ten days forward or backward, and is ever murmuring in my ears: "This rule concerns those who are to begin to be." If health itself, sweet as it is, returns to me by fits, 'tis rather to give me cause of regret than possession of it; I have no place left to keep it in. Time leaves me; without which nothing can be possessed. Oh, what little account should I make of those great elective dignities that I see in such esteem in the world, that are never conferred but upon men who are taking leave of it; wherein they do not so much regard how well the man will discharge his trust, as how short his administration will be: from the very entry they look at the exit.

In short, I am about finishing this man, and not rebuilding another. By long use, this form is in me turned into substance, and fortune into nature.

I say, therefore, that every one of us feeble creatures is excusable in thinking that to be his own which is comprised under this measure; but withal, beyond these limits, 'tis nothing but confusion; 'tis the largest extent we can grant to our own claims. The more we amplify our need and our possession, so much the more do we expose ourselves to the blows of Fortune and adversities. The career of our desires ought to be circumscribed and restrained to a short limit of the nearest and most contiguous commodities; and their course ought, moreover, to be performed not in a right line, that ends elsewhere, but in a circle, of which the two points, by a short wheel, meet and terminate in ourselves. Actions that are carried on without this reflection — a near and essential reflection, I mean — such as those of ambitious and avaricious men, and so many more as run point-blank, and to whose career always carries them before themselves, such actions, I say; are erroneous and sickly.

Most of our business is farce. *Mundus universus exercet histrioniam*. We must play our part properly, but withal as a part of a borrowed personage; we must not make real essence of a mask and outward appearance; nor of a strange person, our own; we cannot distinguish the skin from the shirt: 'tis enough to meal the face, without meal the breast. I see some who transform and transubstantiate themselves into as many new shapes and new beings as they undertake new employments; and who strut and fume even to the heart and liver, and carry their state along with them even to the close-stool: I cannot make them distinguish the salutations made to themselves from those made to their commission, their train, or their mule. *Tantum se fortunæ permittunt, etiam ut naturam dediscant*. They swell and puff up their souls, and their natural way of speaking, according to the height of their magisterial place. The Mayor of Bordeaux and Montaigne have ever been two by very manifest separation. Because one is an advocate or a financier, he must not ignore the knavery there is in such callings; an honest man is not accountable for the vice or absurdity of his employment, and ought not on that account refuse to take the calling upon

The whole world is busy acting. • LIP.,
CONST., 1.8 (CITING PETRONIUS)

They so much give themselves up to
fortune, as even to unlearn nature. •
CURT., HIST., 3.2

him: 'tis the usage of his country, and there is money to be got by it; a man must live by the world; and make his best of it, such as it is. But the judgment of an emperor ought to be above his empire, and see and consider it as a foreign accident; and he ought to know how to enjoy himself apart from it, and to communicate himself as James and Peter, to himself, at all events.

I cannot engage myself so deep and so entire; when my will gives me to anything, 'tis not with so violent an obligation that my judgment is infected with it. In the present broils of this kingdom, my own interest has not made me blind to the laudable qualities of our adversaries, nor to those that are reproachable in those men of our party. Others adore all of their own side; for my part, I do not so much as excuse most things in those of mine: a good work has never the worst grace with me for being made against me. The knot of the controversy excepted, I have always kept myself in equanimity and pure indifference: *Neque extra necessitates belli præcipuum odium gero*; for which I am pleased with myself; and the more because I see others commonly fail in the contrary direction. *Utatur motu animi qui uti ratione non potest*. Such as extend their anger and hatred beyond the dispute in question, as most men do, show that they spring from some other occasion and private cause; like one who, being cured of an ulcer, has yet a fever remaining, by which it appears that the ulcer had another more concealed beginning. The reason is that they are not concerned in the common cause, because it is wounding to the state and general interest; but are only nettled by reason of their particular concern. This is why they are so especially animated, and to a degree so far beyond justice and public reason. *Non tam omnia universi, quam ea, quæ ad quemque pertinent, singuli carpebant*.

I would have the advantage on our side; but if it be not, I shall not run mad. I am heartily for the right party; but I do not want to be taken notice of as an especial enemy to others, and beyond the general quarrel. I marvellously challenge this vicious form of opinion: "He is of the League because he admires the graciousness of Monsieur de Guise; he is astonished at the King of Navarre's energy, therefore he is a Huguenot; he finds this to say of the manners of the king, he is therefore seditious in his heart." And I did not grant to the magistrate himself that he did well in condemning a book because it had placed a heretic among the best poets of the time. Shall we not dare to say of a thief that he has a handsome leg? If a woman be a strumpet, must it needs follow that she has a foul smell? Did they in the wisest ages revoke the proud title of Capitoline they had before conferred on Marcus Manlius as conservator of religion and the public liberty, and stifle the memory of his liberality, his feats of arms, and military recompenses granted to his valor, because he, afterward aspired to the sovereignty, to the prejudice of the laws of his country? If we take a hatred against an advocate, he will not be allowed the next day to be eloquent. I have elsewhere spoken of the zeal that pushed on worthy men to the like faults. For my part, I can say, "Such an one does this thing ill, and another thing virtuously and well."

So in the prognostication or sinister events of affairs they would have every one in his party blind or a blockhead, and that our persuasion and

Nor bear particular hatred beyond the necessities of war;

Let they who cannot use reason use passion instead. • CIC., TUSC., 6.25

Every one was not so much angry against things in general, as against those that particularly concern himself. • LIVY, 34.36

judgment should subserve not truth, but to the project of our desires. I should rather incline toward the other extreme; so much I fear being suborned by my desire; to which may be added that I am a little tenderly distrustful of things that I wish. I have in my time seen wonders in the indiscreet and prodigious facility of people in suffering their hopes and belief to be led and governed, which way best pleased and served their leaders, despite a hundred mistakes one upon another, despite mere dreams and phantasms. I no more wonder at those who have been blinded and seduced by the fooleries of Apollonius and Mahomet. Their sense and understanding are absolutely taken away by their passion; their discretion has no more any other choice than that which smiles upon them and encourages their cause. I had principally observed this in the beginning of our intestine distempers; that other, which has sprung up since, in imitating, has surpassed it; by which I am satisfied that it is a quality inseparable from popular errors; after the first, that rolls, opinions drive on one another like waves with the wind: a man is not a member of the body, if it be in his power to forsake it, and if he do not roll the common way. But, doubtless, they wrong the just side when they go about to assist it with fraud; I have ever been against that practice: 'tis only fit to work upon weak heads; for the sound, there are surer and more honest ways to keep up their courage and to excuse adverse accidents.

Heaven never saw a greater animosity than that betwixt Caesar and Pompey, nor ever shall; and yet I observe, methinks, in those brave souls, a great moderation toward one another: it was a jealousy of honor and command, which did not transport them to a furious and indiscreet hatred, and was without malignity and detraction: in their hottest exploits upon one another, I discover some remains of respect and good-will: and am therefore of opinion that, had, it been possible, each of them would rather have done his business without the ruin of the other than with it. Take notice how much otherwise matters went with Marius and Sylla.

We must not precipitate ourselves so headlong after our affections and interests. As, when I was young, I opposed myself to the progress of love which I perceived to advance too fast upon me, and had a care lest it should at last become so pleasing as to force, captivate, and wholly reduce me to its mercy: so I do the same upon all other occasions where my will is running on with too warm an appetite. I lean opposite to the side it inclines to; as I find it going to plunge and make itself drunk with its own wine; I evade nourishing its pleasure so far, that I cannot recover it without infinite loss.

Souls that, through their own stupidity, only discern things by halves, have this happiness, that they smart less with hurtful things: 'tis a spiritual leprosy that has some show of health, and such a health as philosophy does not altogether condemn; but yet we have no reason to call it wisdom, as we often do. And after this manner some one anciently mocked Diogenes, who, in the depth of winter and quite naked, went embracing an image of snow for a trial of his endurance: the other seeing him in this position, "Art thou now very cold?" said he. "Not at all," replied Diogenes. "Why, then," pursued the other, "what difficult and exemplary thing dost thou think

thou doest in embracing that snow?" To take a true measure of constancy, one must necessarily know what the suffering is.

But souls that are to meet with adverse events and the injuries of fortune, in their depth and sharpness, that are to weigh and taste them according to their natural weight and bitterness, let such show their skill in avoiding the causes and diverting the blow. What did King Cotys do? He paid liberally for the rich and beautiful vessel that had been presented to him, but, seeing it was exceedingly brittle, he immediately broke it betimes, to prevent so easy a matter of displeasure against his servants. In like manner, I have willingly avoided all confusion in my affairs, and never coveted to have my estate contiguous to those of my relations, and such with whom I coveted a strict friendship; for thence matter of unkindness and falling out often proceeds. I formerly loved hazardous games of cards and dice; but have long since left them off, only for this reason that, with whatever good air I carried my losses, I could not help feeling vexed within. A man of honor, who ought to be touchily sensible of the lie or of an insult, and who is not to take a scurvy excuse for satisfaction, should avoid occasions of dispute. I shun melancholy, crabbed men, as I would the plague; and in matters I cannot talk of without emotion and concern I never meddle, if not compelled by my duty. *Melius non incipient, quam desinent.* The surest way, therefore, is to prepare one's self beforehand for occasions.

I know very well that some wise men have taken another way, and have not feared to grapple and engage to the utmost upon several subjects these are confident of their own strength, under which they protect themselves in all ill successes, making their patience wrestle and contend with disaster:

*velut rupes, vastum quæ prodit in æquor,
Obvia ventorum furiis, expostaque ponto,
Vim cunctam atque minas perfert cælique marisque,
Ipsa immota manens.*

Let us not attempt these examples; we shall never come up to them. They set themselves resolutely, and without agitation, to behold the ruin of their country, which possessed and commanded all their will: this is too much, and too hard a task for our commoner souls. Cato gave up the noblest life that ever was upon this account; we meaner spirits must fly from the storm as far as we can; we must provide for sentiment, and not for patience, and evade the blows we cannot meet. Zeno, seeing Chremonides, a young man whom he loved, draw near to sit down by him, suddenly started up; and Cleanthes demanding of him the reason why he did so, "I hear," said he, "that physicians especially order repose, and forbid emotion in all tumors." Socrates does not say: "Do not surrender to the charms of beauty; stand your ground, and do your utmost to oppose it." "Fly it," says he; "shun the fight and encounter of it, as of a powerful poison that darts and wounds at a distance." And his good disciple, feigning or reciting, but, in my opinion, rather reciting than feigning, the rare perfections of the great Cyrus, makes him distrustful of his own strength to resist the charms of the divine beauty of that illustrious Panthea, his captive, and committing the visiting and keeping her to another, who could not have so much liberty as himself. And the Holy Ghost in like manner: *ne nos inducas*

They had better never to begin than to have to desist. • SEN., EP., 72

As a rock, which projects into the vast ocean, exposed to the furious winds and the raging sea, defies the force and menaces of sky and sea, itself unshaken. • VERG., AEN., 10.693

Lead us not into temptation. •

in tentationem. We do not pray that our reason may not be combated and overcome by concupiscence, but that it should not be so much as tried by it; that we should not be brought into a state wherein we are so much as to suffer the approaches, solicitations, and temptations of sin: and we beg of Almighty God to keep our consciences quiet, fully and perfectly delivered from all commerce of evil.

MATT., 6.13

Such as say that they have reason for their revenging passion, or any other sort of troublesome agitation of mind, often say true, as things now are, but not as they were: they speak to us when the causes of their error are by themselves nourished and advanced; but look backward — recall these causes to their beginning — and there you will put them to a nonplus. Will they have their faults less, for being of longer continuance; and that of an unjust beginning, the sequel can be just?

Whoever shall desire the good of his country, as I do, without fretting or pining himself, will be troubled, but will not swoon to see it threatening either its own ruin, or a no less ruinous continuance; poor vessel, that the waves, the winds, and the pilot toss and steer to so contrary designs!

*in tam diversa magister
Ventus & unda trahunt.*¹

Pilot, wind, and wave pull in
opposite directions. • BUCH., FF., 13

He who does not gape after the favor of princes, as after a thing he cannot live without, does not much concern himself at the coldness of their reception and countenance, nor at the inconstancy of their wills. He who does not brood over his children or his honors with a slavish propension, ceases not to live commodiously enough after their loss. He who does good principally for his own satisfaction will not be much troubled to see men judge of his actions contrary to his merit. A quarter of an ounce of patience will provide sufficiently against such inconveniences. I find ease in this receipt, redeeming myself in the beginning as good cheap as I can; and find that by this means I have escaped much trouble and many difficulties. With very little ado I stop the first sally of my emotions, and leave the subject that begins to be troublesome before it transports me. He who stops not the start will never be able to stop the course; he who cannot keep them out will never, get them out when they are once got in; and he who cannot arrive at the beginning will never arrive at the end of all. Nor will he bear the fall who cannot sustain the shock. *Etenim ipsæ se impellunt, ubi semel a ratione discessum est; ipsaque sibi imbecillitas indulget, in altumque provehitur imprudens, nec reperit locum consistendi.* I am betimes sensible of the little breezes that begin to sing and whistle within, forerunners of the storm: *animus, multo antequam opprimatur, quatitur.*

For they throw themselves headlong
when once they lose their reason;
and infirmity so far indulges itself,
and from want of prudence is carried
out into deep water, nor finds a place
to shelter it. • CIC., TUSC., 4.18

*ceu flamina prima
Cum deprensa fremunt sylvis, & cæca volutant
Murmura, venturos nautis prodentia ventos.*

Soul, much before it is crushed, is
shaken.

How often have I done myself a manifest injustice to avoid the hazard of having yet a worse done me by the judges, after an age of vexations, dirty and vile practices, more enemies to my nature than fire or the rack? *Convenit a litibus, quantum licet, et nescio an paulo plus etiam quam licet, abhorrentem esse.*

As the breezes, pent in the woods,
first send out dull murmurs,
announcing the approach of winds
to mariners. • VERG., AEN., 10.97

Est enim non modo liberale, paululum nonnunquam de suo iure decedere, Sed interdum etiam fructuosum. Were we wise, we ought to rejoice and boast, as I one day heard a young gentleman of a good family very innocently do, that his mother had lost her cause, as if it had been a cough, a fever, or something very troublesome to keep. Even the favors that fortune might have given me through relationship or acquaintance with those who have sovereign authority in those affairs, I have very conscientiously and very carefully avoided employing them to the prejudice of others, and of advancing my pretensions above their true right. In fine, I have so much prevailed by my endeavors (and happily I may say it) that I am to this day a virgin from all suits in law; though I have had very fair offers made me, and with very just title, would I have hearkened to them, and a virgin from quarrels too. I have almost passed over a long life without any offense of moment, either active or passive, or without ever hearing a worse word than my own name: a rare favor of Heaven.

A man should abhor lawsuits as much as he may, and I know not whether not something more; for 'tis not only liberal, but sometimes also advantageous, too, a little to recede from one's right. • CIC., OFF., 2.18

Our greatest agitations have ridiculous springs and causes: what ruin did our last Duke of Burgundy run into about a cartload of sheepskins! And was not the graving of a seal the first and principal cause of the greatest commotion that this machine of the world ever underwent? for Pompey and Caesar were but the offsets and continuation of the two others: and I have in my time seen the wisest heads in this kingdom assembled with great ceremony, and at the public expense, about treaties and agreements, of which the true decision, in the meantime, absolutely depended upon the ladies' cabinet council, and the inclination of some bit of a woman. The poets very well understood this when they put all Greece and Asia to fire and sword about an apple. Look why that man hazards his life and honor upon the fortune of his rapier and dagger; let him acquaint you with the occasion of the quarrel; he cannot do it without blushing: the occasion is so idle and frivolous.

A little thing will engage you in it; but being once embarked, all the cords draw; great provisions are then required, more hard and more important. How much easier is it not to enter in than it is to get out? Now we should proceed contrary to the reed, which, at its first springing, produces a long and straight shoot, but afterward, as if tired and out of breath, it runs into thick and frequent joints and knots, as so many pauses which demonstrate that it has no more its first vigor and firmness; 'twere better to begin gently and coldly, and to keep one's breath and vigorous efforts for the height and stress of the business. We guide affairs in their beginnings, and have them in our own power; but afterward, when they are once at work, 'tis they that guide and govern us, and we are to follow them.

Yet do I not mean to say that this counsel has discharged me of all difficulty, and that I have not often had enough to do to curb and restrain my passions; they are not always to be governed according to the measure of occasions, and often have their entries very sharp and violent. But still good fruit and profit may thence be reaped; except for those who in well-doing are not satisfied with any benefit, if reputation be wanting; for, in truth, such an effect is not valued but by every one to himself; you are better contented, but not more esteemed, seeing you reformed yourself before you got into the whirl of the dance, or that the provocative matter

was in sight. Yet not in this only, but in all other duties of life also, the way of those who aim at honor is very different from that they proceed by, who propose to themselves order and reason.

I find some who rashly and furiously rush into the lists and cool in the course. As Plutarch says, that those who, through false shame, are soft and facile to grant whatever is desired of them, are afterward as facile to break their word and to recant; so he who enters lightly into a quarrel is apt to go as lightly out of it. The same difficulty that keeps me from entering into it, would, when once hot and engaged in quarrel, incite me to maintain it with great obstinacy and resolution. 'Tis the tyranny of custom; when a man is once engaged; he must go through with it, or die. "Undertake coolly," said Bias, "but pursue with ardor." For want of prudence, men fall into want of courage, which is still more intolerable.

Most accommodations of the quarrels of these days of ours are shameful and false; we only seek to save appearances, and in the meantime betray and disavow our true intentions; we salve over the fact. We know very well how we said the thing, and in what sense we spoke it, and the company know it, and our friends whom we have wished to make sensible of our advantage, understand it well enough too: 'tis at the expense of our frankness and of the honor of our courage, that we disown our thoughts, and seek refuge in falsities, to make matters up. We give ourselves the lie, to excuse the lie we have given to another. You are not to consider if your word or action may admit of another interpretation; 'tis your own true and sincere interpretation, your real meaning in what you said or did, that you are thenceforward to maintain, whatever it cost you. Men speak to your virtue and conscience, which are not things to be put under a mask; let us leave these pitiful ways and expedients to the jugglers of the law. The excuses and reparations that I see every day made and given to repair indiscretion, seem to me more scandalous than the indiscretion itself. It were better to affront your adversary a second time than to offend yourself by giving him so unmanly a satisfaction. You have braved him in your heat and anger, and you would flatter and appease him in your cooler and better sense; and by that means lay yourself lower and at his feet, whom before you pretended to overtop. I do not find anything a gentleman can say so vicious in him as unsaying what he has said is infamous, when to unsay it is authoritatively extracted from him; forasmuch as obstinacy is more excusable in a man of honor than pusillanimity.

Passions are as easy for me to evade, as they are hard for me to moderate. *Exscinduntur facilius ammo, quam temperantur.* He who cannot attain the noble Stoical impassibility, let him secure himself in the bosom of this popular stolidity of mine; what they performed by virtue, I inure myself to do by temperament. The middle region harbors storms and tempests; the two extremes, of philosophers and peasants, concur in tranquillity and happiness.

*Fælix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas,
Atque metus omnes & inexorabile fatum
Subiecit pedibus, strepitumque Acherontis avari,*

They are more easily to be eradicated than governed.

Happy is he who could discover the causes of things, and place under his feet all fears and inexorable fate, and the sound of rapacious Acheron: he is

*Fortunatus & ille, Deos qui novit agrestes,
Panaque, Sylvanumque senem, Nymphasque sorores!*

The births of all things are weak and tender; and therefore we should have our eyes intent on beginnings; for as when, in its infancy, the danger is not perceived, so when it is grown up, the remedy is as little to be found. I had every day encountered a million of crosses, harder to digest in the progress of ambition, than it has been hard for me to curb the natural propension that inclined me to it:

*iure perhorruui
Late conspicuum tollere verticem.*

All public actions are subject to uncertain and various interpretations; for too many heads judge of them. Some say of this civic employment of mine (and I am willing to say a word or two about it, not that it is worth so much, but to give an account of my manners in such things), that I have behaved myself in it as a man who is too supine and of a languid temperament; and they have some color for what they say. I endeavored to keep my mind and my thoughts in repose; *cum semper natura, tum etiam ætate iam quietus*; and if they sometimes lash out upon some rude and sensible impression, 'tis in truth without my advice. Yet from this natural heaviness of mine, men ought not to conclude a total inability in me (for want of care and want of sense are two very different things), and much less any unkindness or ingratitude toward that corporation who employed the utmost means they had in their power to oblige me, both before they knew me and after; and they did much more for me in choosing me anew than in conferring that honor upon me at first. I wish them all imaginable good; and assuredly had occasion been, there is nothing I would have spared for their service; I did for them as I would have done for myself. 'Tis a good, warlike, and generous people, but capable of obedience and discipline, and of whom the best use may be made, if well guided. They say also that my administration passed over without leaving any mark or trace. Good! They moreover accuse my cessation in a time when everybody almost was convicted of doing too much.

I am impatient to be doing where my will spurs me on; but this itself is an enemy to perseverance. Let him who will make use of me according to my own way, employ me in affairs where vigor and liberty are required, where a direct, short, and, moreover, a hazardous conduct are necessary; I may do something; but if it must be long, subtle, laborious, artificial and intricate, he had better call in somebody else.

All important offices are not necessarily difficult: I came prepared to do somewhat rougher work, had there been great occasion; for it is in my power to do something more than I do, or than I love to do. I did not, to my knowledge, omit anything that my duty really required. I easily forgot those offices that ambition mixes with duty and palliates with its title; these are they that, for the most part, fill the eyes and ears, and give men the most satisfaction; not the thing but the appearance contents them; if they hear no noise, they think men sleep. My humor is no friend to tumult; I could appease a commotion without commotion, and chastise a disorder

blest who knows the country gods,
and Pan, and old Sylvanus, and the
sister nymphs. • VERG., G., 2.490

I ever justly feared to raise my head
too high. • HOR., CARM., 3.16.18

As being always quiet by nature, so
also now by age; • CIC., PET., 2

without being myself disorderly; if I stand in need of anger and inflammation, I borrow it, and put it on. My manners are languid, rather faint than sharp. I do not condemn a magistrate who sleeps, provided the people under his charge sleep as well as he: the laws in that case sleep too. For my part, I commend a gliding, staid, and silent life, *neque submissam et abiectam, neque se effluentem*; my fortune will have it so. I am descended from a family that has lived without lustre or tumult, and, time out of mind, particularly ambitious of a character for probity.

neither subject and abject, nor
obtrusive; • CIC., OFF., 1.34

Our people nowadays are so bred up to bustle and ostentation, that good nature, moderation, equability, constancy, and such like quiet and obscure qualities, are no more thought on or regarded. Rough bodies make themselves felt; the smooth are imperceptibly handled: sickness is felt, health little or not at all; no more than the oils that foment us, in comparison of the pains for which we are fomented. 'Tis acting for one's particular reputation and profit, not for the public good, to refer that to be done in the public squares which one may do in the council chamber; and to noon day what might have been done the night before; and to be jealous to do that himself which his colleague can do as well as he; so were some surgeons of Greece wont to perform their operations upon scaffolds in the sight of the people, to draw more practice and profit. They think that good rules cannot be understood but by the sound of trumpet.

Ambition is not a vice of little people, nor of such modest means as ours. One said to Alexander: "Your father will leave you a great dominion, easy and pacific;" this youth was emulous of his father's victories and of the justice of his government; he would not have enjoyed the empire of the world in ease and peace. Alcibiades, in Plato, had rather die young, beautiful, rich, noble, and learned, and all this in full excellence, than to stop short of such condition; this disease is, peradventure, excusable in so strong and so full a soul. When wretched and dwarfish little souls cajole and deceive themselves, and think to spread their fame for having given right judgment in an affair, or maintained the discipline of the guard of a gate of their city, the more they think to exalt their heads the more they show their tails. This little well-doing has neither body nor life; it vanishes in the first mouth, and goes no further than from one street to another. Talk of it by all means to your son or your servant, like that old fellow who, having no other auditor of his praises nor approver of his valor, boasted to his chambermaid, crying, "O Perrete, what a brave, clever man hast thou for thy master!" At the worst, talk of it to yourself, like a councillor of my acquaintance, who, having disgorged a whole cartful of law jargon with great heat and as great folly, coming out of the council chamber to make water, was heard very complacently to mutter betwixt his teeth: *Non nobis, domine, non nobis, Sed nomini tuo da gloriam*. He who gets it of nobody else, let him pay himself out of his own purse.

Not unto us, O Lord, not to us: but
unto Thy name be the glory. •
PSALM, 115.1

Fame is not prostituted at so cheap a rate: rare and exemplary actions, to which it is due, would not endure the company of this prodigious crowd of petty daily performances. Marble may exalt your titles, as much as you please, for having repaired a rod of wall or cleansed a public sewer; but not men of sense. Renown does not follow all good deeds, if novelty and difficulty be not conjoined; nay, so much as mere esteem, according to the

Stoics, is not due to every action that proceeds from virtue; nor will they allow him bare thanks who, out of temperance, abstains from an old bleary-eyed crone. Those who have known the admirable qualities of Scipio Africanus, deny him the glory that Panaetius attributes to him, of being abstinent from gifts, as a glory not so much his as that of his age.

We have pleasures suitable to our lot; let us not usurp those of grandeur: our own are more natural, and by so much more solid and sure, as they are lower. If not for that of conscience, yet at least for ambition's sake, let us reject ambition; let us disdain that thirst of honor and renown, so low and mendicant, that it makes us beg it of all sorts of people. *Quæ est ista laus quæ possit e macello peti?* by abject means, and at what cheap rate soever: 'tis dishonor to be so honored. Let us learn to be no more greedy, than we are capable, of glory. To be puffed up with every action that is innocent or of use, is only for those with whom such things are extraordinary and rare: they will value it as it costs them. The more a good effect makes a noise, the more do I abate of its goodness as I suspect that it was more performed for the noise, than upon account of the goodness: exposed upon the stall, 'tis half sold. Those actions have much more grace and lustre, that slip from the hand of him that does them, negligently and without noise, and that some honest man thereafter finds out and raises from the shade, to produce it to the light upon its own account. *Mihi quidem laudabiliora videntur omnia, quæ sine venditione, et sine populo teste fiunt*, says the most ostentatious man that ever lived.

I had but to conserve and to continue, which are silent and insensible effects: innovation is of great lustre; but 'tis interdicted in this age, when we are pressed upon and have nothing to defend ourselves from but novelties. To forbear doing is often as generous as to do; but 'tis less in the light, and the little good I have in me is of this kind. In fine, occasions in this employment of mine have been confederate with my humor, and I heartily thank them for it. Is there any who desires to be sick, that he may see his physician at work? and would not the physician deserve to be whipped who should wish the plague among us, that he might put his art in practice? I have never been of that wicked humor, and common enough, to desire that troubles and disorders in this city should elevate and honor my government; I have ever heartily contributed all I could to their tranquillity and ease. He who will not thank me for the order, the sweet and silent calm that has accompanied my administration, cannot, however, deprive me of the share that belongs to me by title of my good fortune. And I am of such a composition, that I would as willingly be lucky as wise, and had rather owe my successes purely to the favor of Almighty God, than to any operation of my own. I had sufficiently published to the world my unfitness for such public offices; but I have something in me yet worse than incapacity itself; which is, that I am not much displeased at it, and that I do not much go about to cure it, considering the course of life that I have proposed to myself. Neither have I satisfied myself in this employment; but I have very near arrived at what I expected from my own performance, and have much surpassed what I promised them with whom I had to do: for I am apt to promise something less than what I am able to do, and than what I hope to make good. I assure myself that I have left no

What praise is that which is to be got in the market? • CÍC., FIN., 2.15

All things truly seem more laudable to me that are performed without ostentation, and without the testimony of the people, • CÍC., TUSC., 2.26

offense or hatred behind me; to leave regret or desire for me among them,
I at least know very well that I never much aimed at it:

*me ne huic confidere monstro,
Mene salis placidi vultum, fluctusque quietos
Ignorare?*

Should I place confidence in this monster? Should I be ignorant of the dangers of that seeming placid sea, those now quiet waves? • VERG., AEN., 5.849

NOTES

- ¹ The source of this quote is uncertain but appears to derive from *Franciscanus et Fratres* where Buchanan wrote: *Quam uenti uiolensque aestus canusque magister / In diuersa trahunt*

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Buch., FF.	Buchanan, George, <i>Franciscanus et Fratres</i>
Cic., Fin.	Cicero, <i>On Ends</i>
Cic., Off.	Cicero, <i>On Duties</i>
Cic., Tusc.	Cicero, <i>Tusculan Disputations</i>
Curt., Hist.	Quintus Curtius Rufus, <i>Histories of Alexander the Great</i>
Hor., Carm.	Horace, <i>Odes</i>
Hor., Epist.	Horace, <i>Epistles</i>
Lip., Const.	Lipsius, Justus, <i>De Constantia Libri Duo</i>
Livy	Livy, <i>History of Rome</i>
Matt.	<i>Gospel of Matthew</i>
Nonius, Doc.	Nonius Marcellus, <i>De Compendiosa Doctrina</i>
Psalms	<i>Book of Psalms</i>
Ov., Tri.	Ovid, <i>Tristia</i>
Cic., Pet.	Quintus Tullius Cicero, <i>Handbook of Electioneering</i>
Quint., Inst.	Quintilian, <i>Orator's Education</i>

Sen., Ep.	Seneca, <i>Epistles</i>
Stat., Theb.	Statius, <i>Thebaid</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>
Verg., G.	Virgil, <i>Georgics</i>