

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 3 · Chapter 4

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

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ESSAYS-3-4-20260831-212255

On Diversion

I was once employed in consoling a lady truly afflicted. Most of their mournings are artificial and ceremonious:

*Uberibus semper lachrimis, semperque paratis,
In statione sua, atque expectantibus illam,
Quo iubeat manare modo.*

A woman has ever a fountain of tears ready to gush up whenever she requires to make use of them. •
JUV., 6.272

A man goes the wrong way to work when he opposes this passion; for opposition does but irritate and make them more obstinate in sorrow; the evil is exasperated by discussion. We see, in common discourse, that what I have indifferently let fall from me, if any one takes it up to controvert it, I justify it with the best arguments I have; and much more a thing wherein I had a real interest. And besides, in so doing you enter roughly upon your operation; whereas the first addresses of a physician to his patient should be gracious, gay, and pleasing; never did any ill-looking, morose physician do anything to purpose. On the contrary, then, a man should, at the first approaches, favor their grief and express some approbation of their sorrow. By this intelligence you obtain credit to proceed further, and by a facile and insensible gradation fall into discourses more solid and proper for their cure.

I, whose aim it was principally to gull the company who had their eyes fixed upon me, took it into my head only to palliate the disease. And indeed I have found by experience that I have an unlucky hand in persuading. My arguments are either too sharp and dry, or pressed too roughly, or not home enough. After I had some time applied myself to her grief, I did not attempt to cure her by strong and lively reasons, either because I had them not at hand, or because I thought to do my business better another way; neither did I make choice of any of those methods of consolation which philosophy prescribes: that what we complain of is no evil, according to Cleanthes; that it is a light evil, according to the Peripatetics; that to bemoan one's self is an action neither commendable nor just, according to Chrysippus; nor this of Epicurus, more suitable to my way, of shifting the thoughts from afflicting things to those that are pleasing; nor making a bundle of all these together, to make use of upon occasion, according to Cicero; but, gently bending my discourse, and by

little and little digressing, sometimes to subjects nearer, and sometimes more remote from the purpose, according as she was more intent on what I said, I imperceptibly led her from that sorrowful thought, and kept her calm and in good-humor whilst I continued there. I herein made use of diversion. They who succeeded me in the same service did not, for all that, find any amendment in her, for I had not gone to the root.

I, peradventure, may elsewhere have glanced upon some sort of public diversions; and the practice of military ones, which Pericles made use of in the Peloponnesian war, and a thousand others in other places, to withdraw the adverse forces from their own countries, is too frequent in history.

It was an ingenious evasion whereby Monseigneur d'Hempricourt saved both himself and others in the city of Liege, into which the duke of Burgundy, who kept it besieged, had made him enter to execute the articles of their promised surrender; the people, being assembled by night to consider of it, began to mutiny against the agreement, and several of them resolved to fall upon the commissioners, whom they had in their power; he, feeling the gusts of this first popular storm, who were coming to rush into his lodgings, suddenly sent out to them two of the inhabitants of the city (of whom he had some with him) with new and milder terms to be proposed in their council, which he had then and there contrived for his need: These two diverted the first tempest, carrying back the enraged rabble to the town-hall to hear and consider of what they had to say. The deliberation was short; a second storm arose as violent as the other, whereupon he despatched four new mediators of the same quality to meet them, protesting that he had now better conditions to present them with, and such as would give them absolute satisfaction, by which means the tumult was once more appeased, and the people again turned back to the conclave. In fine, by this dispensation of amusements, one after another, diverting their fury and dissipating it in frivolous consultations, he laid it at last asleep till the day appeared, which was his principal end.

This other story that follows is also of the same category. Atalanta, a virgin of excelling beauty and of wonderful disposition of body, to disengage herself from the crowd of a thousand suitors who sought her in marriage, made this proposition, that she would accept of him for her husband who should equal her in running, upon condition that they who failed should lose their lives. There were enough who thought the prize very well worth the hazard, and who suffered the cruel penalty of the contract. Hippomenes, about to make trial after the rest, made his address to the goddess of love, imploring her assistance; and she, granting his request, gave him three golden apples, and instructed him how to use them. The race beginning, as Hippomenes perceived his mistress to press hard up to him; he, as it were by chance, let fall one of these apples; the maid, taken with the beauty of it, failed not to step out of her way to pick it up.

*Obstupuit virgo, nitidique cupidine pomi
Declinat cursus, aurumque volubile tollit.*

He did the same, when he saw his time, by the second and the third, till by so diverting her, and making her lose so much ground, he won the race.

The virgin, astonished and attracted by the glittering apple, stops her career, and seizes the rolling gold. • Ov., MET., 10.666

When physicians cannot stop a catarrh, they divert and turn it into some other less dangerous part. And I find also that this is the most ordinary practice for the diseases of the mind. *Abducendus etiam nonnunquam animus est ad alia studia, sollicitudines, curas, negotia; loci denique mutatione, tanquam ægroti non convalescentes, sæpe curandus est.* 'Tis to little effect directly to jostle a man's infirmities; we neither make him sustain nor repel the attack; we only make him decline and evade it.

The mind is sometimes to be diverted to other studies, thoughts, cares, business: in fine, by change of place, as where sick persons do not become convalescent. • CIC., TUSC., 4.35

This other lesson is too high and too difficult: 'tis for men of the first form of knowledge purely to insist upon the thing, to consider and judge it; it appertains to one sole Socrates to meet death with an ordinary countenance, to grow acquainted with it, and to sport with it; he seeks no consolation out of the thing itself; dying appears to him a natural and indifferent accident; 'tis there that he fixes his sight and resolution, without looking elsewhere. The disciples of Hegesias, who starved themselves to death, animated thereunto by his fine lectures, and in such numbers that King Ptolemy ordered he should be forbidden to entertain his followers with such homicidal doctrines, did not consider death in itself, neither did they judge of it; it was not there they fixed their thoughts; they ran toward and aimed at a new being. The poor wretches whom we see brought upon the scaffold, full of ardent devotion, and therein, as much as in them lies, employing all their senses, their ears in hearing the instructions given them, their eyes and hands lifted up toward heaven, their voices in loud prayers, with a vehement and continual emotion, do doubtless things very commendable and proper for such a necessity: we ought to commend them for their devotion, but not properly for their constancy; they shun the encounter, they divert their thoughts from the consideration of death, as children are amused with some toy or other when the surgeon is going to give them a prick with his lancet. I have seen some, who, casting their eyes upon the dreadful instruments of death round about, have fainted, and furiously turned their thoughts another way; such as are to pass a formidable precipice are advised either to shut their eyes or to look another way.

Subrius Flavius, being by Nero's command to be put to death, and by the hand of Niger, both of them great captains, when they lead him to the place appointed for his execution, seeing the grave that Niger had caused to be hollowed to put him into ill-made: "Neither is this," said he, turning to the soldiers who guarded him, "according to military discipline." And to Niger, who exhorted him to keep his head firm: "Do but thou strike as firmly," said he. And he very well foresaw what would follow when he said so; for Niger's arm so trembled that he had several blows at his head before he could cut it off. This man seems to have had his thoughts rightly fixed upon the subject.

He who dies in a battle, with his sword in his hand, does not then think of death; he feels or considers it not; the ardor of the fight diverts his thought another way. A worthy man of my acquaintance, falling as he was fighting a duel, and feeling himself nailed to the earth by nine or ten thrusts of his enemy, every one present called to him to think of his conscience; but he has since told me, that though he very well heard what they said, it nothing moved him, and that he never thought of anything but how to disengage and revenge himself. He afterwards killed his man in that very duel.

He who brought to L. Silanus the sentence of death, did him a very great kindness, in that, having received his answer, that he was well prepared to die, but not by base hands, he ran upon him with his soldiers to force him, and as he, unarmed as he was, obstinately defended himself with his fists and feet, he made him lose his life in the contest, by that means dissipating and diverting in a sudden and furious rage the painful apprehension of the lingering death to which he was designed.

We always think of something else; either the hope of a better life comforts and supports us, or the hope of our children's worth, or the future glory of our name, or the leaving behind the evils of this life, or the vengeance that threatens those who are the causes of our death, administers consolation to us,

*Spero equidem mediis, si quid pia numina possunt,
Supplicia hausurum scopulis, et nomine Dido
Sæpe vocaturum.
Audiam, et hæc manes veniet mihi fama sub imos.*

I hope, however, if the pious gods have any power, thou wilt feel thy punishment amid the rocks, and will call on the name of Dido; I shall hear, and this report will come to me below. • VERG., AEN., 4.382 AND 4.387

Xenophon was sacrificing with a crown upon his head when one came to bring him news of the death of his son Gryllus, slain in the battle of Mantinea: at the first surprise of the news, he threw his crown to the ground; but understanding by the sequel of the narrative the manner of a most brave and valiant death, he took it up and replaced it upon his head.

Epicurus himself, at his death, consoles himself upon the utility and eternity of his writings: *Omnes clari et nobilitati labores fiunt tolerabiles*; and the same wound, the same fatigue, is not, says Xenophon, so intolerable to a general of an army as to a common soldier. Epaminondas took his death much more cheerfully, having been informed that the victory remained to him: *Hæc sunt solatia, hæc fomenta summorum dolorum*. and such like circumstances amuse, divert, and turn our thoughts from the consideration of the thing in itself.

All labors that are illustrious and famous become supportable; • CIC., TUSC., 2.26

These are sedatives and alleviations to the greatest pains; • CIC., TUSC., 2.23

Even the arguments of philosophy are always edging and glancing on the matter, so as scarce to rub its crust; the greatest man of the first philosophical school, and superintendent over all the rest, the great Zeno, forms this syllogism against death: "No evil is honorable; but death is honorable; therefore death is no evil"; against drunkenness this: "No one commits his secrets to a drunkard; but every one commits his secrets to a wise man: therefore a wise man is no drunkard." Is this to hit the white? I love to see that these great and leading souls cannot rid themselves of our company: perfect men as they are, they are yet simply men.

Revenge is a sweet passion, of great and natural impression; I discern it well enough, though I have no manner of experience of it. From this not long ago to divert a young prince, I did not tell him that he must, to him that had struck him upon the one cheek, turn the other, upon account of charity; nor go about to represent to him the tragical events that poetry attributes to this passion. I left that behind; and I busied myself to make him relish the beauty of a contrary image: and, by representing to him what honor, esteem, and goodwill he would acquire by clemency and good nature, diverted him to ambition. Thus a man is to deal in such cases.

"If your passion of love be too violent, disperse it," say they, and they say true; for I have often tried it with advantage: break it into several desires, of which let one be regent, if you will, over the rest; but, lest it should tyrannize and domineer over you, weaken and protract, by dividing and diverting it:

Cum morosa vago singultiet inguine vena ...

Coniicito humorem collectum in corpora quaeque.

And provide for it in time, lest it prove troublesome to deal with, when it has once seized you,

*Si non prima novis conturbes vulnera plagis,
Volgivagaque vagus venere ante recentia cures.*

I was once wounded with a vehement displeasure, and withal, more just than vehement; I might peradventure have lost myself in it, if I had merely trusted to my own strength. Having need of a powerful diversion to disengage me, by art and study I became amorous, wherein I was assisted by my youth: love relieved and rescued me from the evil wherein friendship had engaged me. 'Tis in everything else the same; a violent imagination hath seized me: I find it a nearer way to change than to subdue it: I depute, if not one contrary, yet another at least, in its place. Variation ever relieves, dissolves, and dissipates. If I am not able to contend with it, I escape from it; and in avoiding it, slip out of the way, and make, my doubles; shifting place, business, and company, I secure myself in the crowd of other thoughts and fancies, where it loses my trace, and I escape.

After the same manner does nature proceed, by the benefit of inconstancy; for time, which she has given us for the sovereign physician of our passions, chiefly works by this, that supplying our imaginations with other and new affairs, it loosens and dissolves the first apprehension, how strong soever. A wise man little less sees his friend dying at the end of five-and-twenty years than on the first year; and according to Epicurus, no less at all; for he did not attribute any alleviation of afflictions, either to their foresight or their antiquity; but so many other thoughts traverse this, that it languishes and tires at last.

Alcibiades, to divert the inclination of common rumors, cut off the ears and tail of his beautiful dog, and turned him out into the public place, to the end that, giving the people this occasion to prate, they might let his other actions alone. I have also seen, for this same end of diverting the opinions and conjectures of the people and to stop their mouths, some women conceal their real affections by those that were only counterfeit; but I have also seen some of them, who in counterfeiting have suffered themselves to be caught indeed, and who have quitted the true and original affection for the feigned: and so have learned that they who find their affections well placed are fools to consent to this disguise: the public and favorable reception being only reserved for this pretended lover, one may conclude him a fellow of very little address and less wit, if he does not in the end put himself into your place, and you into his; this is precisely to cut out and make up a shoe for another to draw on.

When you are filled with sexual desire ... • PERS., 6.73

Empty the thick liquid into any body. • LUCR., 6.1062

If you do not confuse the first wounds by new blows, and cure them in time while fresh by wandering with promiscuous love.
• LUCR., 4.1070

A little thing will turn and divert us, because a little thing holds us. We do not much consider subjects in gross and singly; they are little and superficial circumstances, or images that touch us, and the outward useless rinds that peel off from the subjects themselves,

*Folliculos ut nunc teretes æstate cicadæ
Linquunt.*

Even Plutarch himself laments his daughter for the little apish tricks of her infancy. The remembrance of a farewell, of the particular grace of an action, of a last recommendation, afflict us. The sight of Caesar's robe troubled all Rome, which was more than his death had done. Even the sound of names ringing in our ears, as "my poor master,"—"my faithful friend,"—"alas, my dear father," or, "my sweet daughter," afflict us. When these repetitions annoy me, and that I examine it a little nearer, I find 'tis no other but a grammatical and word complaint; I am only wounded with the word and tone, as the exclamations of preachers very often work more upon their auditory than their reasons, and as the pitiful eyes of a beast killed for our service; without my weighing or penetrating meanwhile into the true and solid essence of my subject;

his se stimulus dolor ipse lacessit.

These are the foundations of our mourning.

The obstinacy of my stone to all remedies especially those in my bladder, has sometimes thrown me into so long suppressions of urine for three or four days together, and so near death, that it had been folly to have hoped to evade it, and it was much rather to have been desired, considering the miseries I endure in those cruel fits. Oh, that good emperor, who caused criminals to be tied that they might die for want of urination, was a great master in the hangman's science! Finding myself in this condition, I considered by how many light causes and objects imagination nourished in me the regret of life; of what atoms the weight and difficulty of this dislodging was composed in my soul; to how many idle and frivolous thoughts we give way in so great an affair; a dog, a horse, a book, a glass, and what not, were considered in my loss; to others their ambitious hopes, their money, their knowledge, not less foolish considerations in my opinion than mine. I look upon death carelessly when I look upon it universally as the end of life. I insult over it in gross, but in detail it domineers over me: the tears of a footman, the disposing of my clothes, the touch of a friendly hand, a common consolation, discourages and softens me.

So do the complaints in tragedies agitate our souls with grief; and the regrets of Dido and Ariadne, impassionate even those who believe them not in Virgil and Catullus.

'Tis a symptom of an obstinate and obdurate nature to be sensible of no emotion, as 'tis reported for a miracle of Polemon; but then he did not so much as alter his countenance at the biting of a mad dog that tore away the calf of his leg; and no wisdom proceeds so far as to conceive so vivid and entire a cause of sorrow, by judgment that it does not suffer increase

As husks we find grasshoppers
leave behind them in summer. •
LUCR., 5.801

With these incitements grief
provokes itself. • LUCR., 2.42

by its presence, when the eyes and ears have their share; parts that are not to be moved but by vain accidents.

Is it reason that even the arts themselves should make an advantage of our natural stupidity and weakness? An orator, says rhetoric in the farce of his pleading, shall be moved with the sound of his own voice and feigned emotions, and suffer himself to be imposed upon by the passion he represents; he will imprint in himself a true and real grief, by means of the part he plays, to transmit it to the judges, who are yet less concerned than he: as they do who are hired at funerals to assist in the ceremony of sorrow, who sell their tears and mourning by weight and measure; for although they act in a borrowed form, nevertheless, by habituating and settling their countenances to the occasion, 'tis most certain they often are really affected with an actual sorrow.

I was one, among several others of his friends, who conveyed the body of Monsieur de Grammont to Soissons from the siege of La Fere, where he was slain; I observed that in all places we passed through we filled the people we met with lamentations and tears by the mere solemn pomp of our convoy, for the name of the defunct was not there so much as known.

Quintilian reports as to have seen comedians so deeply engaged in a mourning part, that they still wept in the retiring room, and who, having taken upon them to stir up passion in another, have themselves espoused it to that degree as to find themselves infected with it, not only to tears, but, moreover, with pallor and the comportment of men really overwhelmed with grief.

In a country near our mountains the women play Priest Martin, for as they augment the regret of the deceased husband by the remembrance of the good and agreeable qualities he possessed, they also at the same time make a register of and publish his imperfections; as if of themselves to enter into some composition, and divert themselves from compassion to disdain. Yet with much better grace than we, who, when we lose an acquaintance, strive to give him new and false praises, and to make him quite another thing when we have lost sight of him than he appeared to us when we did see him; as if regret were an instructive thing, or as if tears, by washing our understandings, cleared them. For my part, I henceforth renounce all favorable testimonies men would give of me, not because I shall be worthy of them, but because I shall be dead.

Whoever shall ask a man, "What interest have you in this siege?" — "The interest of example," he will say, "and of the common obedience to my prince: I pretend to no profit by it; and for glory, I know how small a part can affect a private man such as I: I have here neither passion nor quarrel." And yet you shall see him the next day quite another man, chafing and red with fury, ranged in battle for the assault; 'tis the glittering of so much steel, the fire and noise of our cannon and drums, that have infused this new rigidity and fury into his veins. A frivolous cause, you will say. How a cause? There needs none to agitate the mind; a mere whimsy without body and without subject will rule and agitate it. Let me think of building castles in Spain, my imagination suggests to me conveniences and pleasures with which my soul is really tickled and pleased. How often do we torment our mind with anger or sorrow by such shadows, and engage

ourselves in fantastic passions that impair both soul and body? What astonished, fleeting, confused grimaces does this raving put our faces into! what sallies and agitations both of members and voices does it inspire us with! Does it not seem that this individual man has false visions amid the crowd of others with whom he has to do, or that he is possessed with some internal daemon that persecutes him? Inquire of yourself where is the object of this mutation? is there anything but us in nature which inanity sustains, over which it has power?

Cambyzes, from having dreamt that his brother should be one day king of Persia, put him to death: a beloved brother, and one in whom he had always confided. Aristodemus, king of the Messenians, killed himself out of a fancy of ill omen, from I know not what howling of his dogs; and King Midas did as much upon the account of some foolish dream he had dreamed.

'Tis to prize life at its just value, to abandon it for a dream. And yet hear the soul triumph over the miseries and weakness of the body, and that it is exposed to all attacks and alterations; truly, it has reason so to speak:

*O prima infelix fingenti terra Prometheo!
Ille parum cauti pectoris egit opus.
Corpora disponens, mentem non vidit in arte;
Recta animi primum debuit esse via.*

O wretched clay, first formed by Prometheus. In his attempt, what little wisdom did he shew! In framing bodies, he did not apply his art to form the mind, which should have been his first care. •
PROP., 3.5.7

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Cic., Tusc.	Cicero, <i>Tusculan Disputations</i>
Juv.	Juvenal, <i>Satires</i>
Lucr.	Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i>
Ov., Met.	Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i>
Pers.	Persius, <i>Satires</i>
Prop.	Propertius, <i>Elegies</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>