

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 13

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On Judging of the Death of Another

When we judge of another's assurance in death, which, without doubt, is the most remarkable action of human life, we are to take heed of one thing, which is that men very hardly believe themselves to have arrived to that period. Few men come to die in the opinion that it is their latest hour; and there is nothing wherein the flattery of hope more deludes us; It never ceases to whisper in our ears, "Others have been much sicker without dying; your condition is not so desperate as 'tis thought; and, at the worst, God has done other miracles." Which happens by reason that we set too much value upon ourselves; it seems as if the universality of things were in some measure to suffer by our dissolution, and that it commiserates our condition, forasmuch as our disturbed sight represents things to itself erroneously, and that we are of opinion they stand in as much need of us as we do of them, like people at sea, to whom mountains, fields, cities, heaven and earth are tossed at the same rate as they are,

Provehimur portu, terraeque urbesque recedunt.

Whoever saw old age that did not applaud the past and condemn the present time, laying the fault of his misery and discontent upon the world and the manners of men?

*Iamque caput quassans, grandis suspirat arator.
Et cum tempora temporibus praesentia confert
Præteritis, laudat fortunas sæpe parentis,
Et crepat antiquum genus ut pietate repletum.*

We will make all things go along with us; whence it follows that we consider our death as a very great thing, and that does not so easily pass, nor without the solemn consultation of the stars: *tot circa unum caput tumultuantes dens*, and so much the more think it as we more value ourselves. "What, shall so much knowledge be lost, with so much damage to the world, without a particular concern of the destinies? Does so rare and exemplary a soul cost no more the killing than one that is common and of no use to the public? This life, that protects so many others, upon

We sail out of port, and cities and lands recede. • VERG., AEN., 3.72

Now the old plowman, shaking his head, sighs, and compares present times with past, often praises his parents' happiness, and talks of the old race as full of piety. • LUCR., 2.1164

all the gods to agitation about one man, • SEN., SUAS., 1.4

which so many other lives depend, that employs so vast a number of men in his service, that fills so many places, shall it drop off like one that hangs but by its own simple thread?

None of us lays it enough to heart that he is but one.

Thence proceeded those words of Caesar to his pilot, more tumid than the sea that threatened him:

*Italiam si coelo auctore recusas,
Me pete: sola tibi causa est haec iusta timoris,
Vectorem non nosce tuum ...
perrumpe procellas,
Tutela secure mea.*

And these:

*credit iam digna pericula Caesar
Fatis esse suis; tantusne evertere, dixit,
Me superis labor est, parva quern puppe sedentem,
Tam magno petiere mari.*

and that idle fancy of the public, that the sun bore on his face mourning for his death a whole year:

*Ille etiam extincto miseratus Caesare Romam,
Cum caput obscura nitidum ferrugine textit;*

and a thousand of the like, wherewith the world suffers itself to be so easily imposed upon, believing that our interests affect the heavens, and that their infinity is concerned at our ordinary actions: *Non tanta caelo societas nobiscum est, ut nostro fato mortalis sit ille quoque siderum fulgor.*

Now, to judge of constancy and resolution in a man who does not yet believe himself to be certainly in danger, though he really is, is not reason; and 'tis not enough that he die in this posture, unless he purposely put himself into it for this effect. It commonly falls out in most men that they set a good face upon the matter and speak with great indifference, to acquire reputation, which they hope afterwards, living, to enjoy. Of all whom I have seen die, fortune has disposed their countenances and no design of theirs; and even of those who in ancient times have made away with themselves, there is much to be considered whether it were a sudden or a lingering death. That cruel Roman Emperor would say of his prisoners, that he would make them feel death, and if any one killed himself in prison, "That fellow has made an escape from me;" he would prolong death and make it felt by torments:

*Vidimus et toto quamvis in corpore caeso
Nil anima lethale datum, moremque nefandæ,
Durum sævitæ, pereuntis parcere morti.*

If you decline to sail to Italy under the God's protection, trust to mine; the only just cause you have to fear is, that you do not know your passenger; sail on, secure in my guardianship. • LUC., 5.579

Caesar now deemed these dangers worthy of his destiny: 'What! 'said he, 'is it for the gods so great a task to overthrow me, that they must be fain to assail me with great seas in a poor little bark.' • LUC., 5.653

Caesar being dead, the sun in mourning clouds, pitying Rome, clothed himself. • VERG., G., 1.466

There is no such alliance betwixt us and heaven, that the brightness of the stars should be made also mortal by our death. • PLIN., HN, 2.8

We have seen in tortured bodies, among the wounds, none that have been mortal, inhuman mode of dire cruelty, that means to kill, but will not let men die. • LUC., 4.1.78

In plain truth, it is no such great matter for a man in health and in a temperate state of mind to resolve to kill himself; it is very easy to play the villain before one comes to the point, insomuch that Heliogabalus, the most effeminate man in the world, among his lowest sensualities, could forecast to make himself die delicately, when he should be forced thereto; and that his death might not give the lie to the rest of his life, had purposely built a sumptuous tower, the front and base of which were covered with planks enriched with gold and precious stones, thence to precipitate himself; and also caused cords twisted with gold and crimson silk to be made, wherewith to strangle himself; and a sword with the blade of gold to be hammered out to fall upon; and kept poison in vessels of emerald and topaz wherewith to poison himself according as he should like to choose one of these ways of dying:

Impiger et fortis virtute coacta.

Resolute in the face of death by a forced courage. • LUC., 4.798

Yet in respect of this person, the effeminacy of his preparations makes it more likely that he would have thought better on't, had he been put to the test. But in those who with greater resolution have determined to despatch themselves, we must examine whether it were with one blow which took away the leisure of feeling the effect for it is to be questioned whether, perceiving life, by little and little, to steal away the sentiment of the body mixing itself with that of the soul, and the means of repenting being offered, whether, I say, constancy and obstinacy in so dangerous an intention would have been found.

In the civil wars of Caesar, Lucius Domitius, being taken in the Abruzzi, and thereupon poisoning himself, afterwards repented. It has happened in our time that a certain person, being resolved to die and not having gone deep enough at the first thrust, the sensibility of the flesh opposing his arm, gave himself two or three wounds more, but could never prevail upon himself to thrust home. Whilst Plautius Silvanus was upon his trial, Urgulania, his grandmother, sent him a dagger with which, not being able to kill himself, he made his servants cut his veins. Albucilla in Tiberius time having, to kill himself, struck with too much tenderness, gave his adversaries opportunity to imprison and put him to death their own way. And that great leader, Demosthenes, after his rout in Sicily, did the same.

And C. Fimbria, having struck himself too weakly, entreated his servant to despatch him. On the contrary, Ostorius, who could not make use of his own arm, disdained to employ that of his servant to any other use but only to hold the dagger straight and firm; and bringing his throat to it, thrust himself through. 'Tis, in truth, a morsel that is to be swallowed without chewing, unless a man be thoroughly resolved; and yet Hadrian the emperormade his physician mark and encircle on his pap the mortal place wherein he was to stab to whom he had given orders to kill him. For this reason it was that Caesar, being asked what death he thought to be the most desired, made answer, "The least premeditated and the shortest."

If Caesar dared to say it, it is no cowardice in me to believe it.

"A short death," says Pliny, "is the sovereign good hap of human life." People do not much care to recognize it. No one can say that he is resolute for death who fears to deal with it and cannot undergo it with his eyes open: they whom we see in criminal punishments run to their death and hasten and press their execution, do it not out of resolution, but because they will not give them selves leisure to consider it; it does not trouble them to be dead, but to die,

Emori nolo, Sed me esse mortuum nihil æestimo.

I have no mind to die, but I have no objection to be dead. • CIC., TUSC., 1.8

tis a degree of constancy to which I have experimented, that I can arrive, like those who plunge into dangers, as into the sea, with their eyes shut.

There is nothing, in my opinion, more illustrious in the life of Socrates, than that he had thirty whole days wherein to ruminate upon the sentence of his death, to have digested it all that time with a most assured hope, without care, and without alteration, and with a series of words and actions rather careless and indifferent than any way stirred or discomposed by the weight of such a thought.

That Pomponius Atticus, to whom Cicero writes so often, being sick, caused Agrippa, his son-in-law, and two or three more of his friends, to be called to him, and told them, that having found all means practised upon him for his recovery to be in vain, and that all he did to prolong his life also prolonged and augmented his pain, he was resolved to put an end both to the one and the other, desiring them to approve of his determination, or at least not to lose their labor in endeavoring to dissuade him. Now, having chosen to destroy himself by abstinence, his disease was thereby cured: the remedy that he had made use of to kill himself restored him to health. His physicians and friends, rejoicing at so happy an event, and coming to congratulate him, found themselves very much deceived, it being impossible for them to make him alter his purpose, he telling them, that as he must one day die, and was now so far on his way, he would save himself the labor of beginning another time. This man, having surveyed death at leisure, was not only not discouraged at its approach, but eagerly sought it; for being content that he had engaged in the combat, he made it a point of bravery to see the end; 'tis far beyond not fearing death to taste and relish it.

The story of the philosopher Cleanthes is very like this: he had his gums swollen and rotten; his physicians advised him to great abstinence: having fasted two days, he was so much better that they pronounced him cured, and permitted him to return to his ordinary course of diet; he, on the contrary, already tasting some sweetness in this faintness of his, would not be persuaded to go back, but resolved to proceed, and to finish what he had so far advanced.

Tullius Marcellinus, a young man of Rome, having a mind to anticipate the hour of his destiny, to be rid of a disease that was more trouble to him than he was willing to endure, though his physicians assured him of a certain, though not sudden, cure, called a council of his friends to deliberate about it; of whom some, says Seneca, gave him the counsel that out of unmanliness they would have taken themselves; others, out of

flattery, such as they thought he would best like; but a Stoic said this to him: "Do not concern thyself, Marcellinus, as if thou didst deliberate of a thing of importance; 'tis no great matter to live; thy servants and beasts live; but it is a great thing to die handsomely, wisely, and firmly. Do but think how long thou hast done the same things, eat, drink, and sleep, drink, sleep, and eat: we incessantly wheel in the same circle. Not only ill and insupportable accidents, but even the satiety of living, inclines a man to desire to die." Marcellinus did not stand in need of a man to advise, but of a man to assist him; his servants were afraid to meddle in the business, but this philosopher gave them to understand that domestics are suspected even when it is in doubt whether the death of the master were voluntary or no; otherwise, that it would be of as ill example to hinder him as to kill him, forasmuch as

Invitum qui servat idem facit occidenti.

He then told Marcellinus that it would not be unbecoming, as what is left on the tables when we have eaten is given to the attendants, so, life being ended, to distribute something to those who have been our servants.

Now Marcellinus was of a free and liberal spirit; he, therefore, divided a certain sum of money among his servants, and consoled them. As to the rest, he had no need of steel nor of blood: he resolved to go out of this life and not to run out of it; not to escape from death, but to essay it. And to give himself leisure to deal with it, having forsaken all manner of nourishment, the third day following, after having caused himself to be sprinkled with warm water, he fainted by degrees, and not without some kind of pleasure, as he himself declared. In fact, such as have been acquainted with these faintings, proceeding from weakness, say that they are therein sensible of no manner of pain, but rather feel a kind of delight, as in the passage to sleep and best.

These are studied and digested deaths.

But to the end that Cato only may furnish out the whole example of virtue, it seems as if his good with which the leisure to confront and struggle with death, reinforcing his destiny had put his ill one into the hand he gave himself the blow, seeing he had courage in the danger, instead of letting it go less. And if I had had to represent him in his supreme station, I should have done it in the posture of tearing out his bloody bowels, rather than with his sword in his hand, as did the statuarys of his time, for this second murder was much more furious than the first.

He who makes a man live against his will, 'tis as cruel as to kill him. •

HOR., ARS P., 467

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Cic., Tusc.

Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*

Hor., Ars P.

Horace, *Art of Poetry*

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Luc.	Lucan, <i>Civil War</i>
Lucret.	Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i>
Plin., HN	Pliny, <i>Natural History</i>
Sen., Suas.	Seneca the Elder, <i>Suasoriae</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>
Verg., G.	Virgil, <i>Georgics</i>