Michel de Montaigne

Essays

Book 1 · Chapter 10

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-1-10-20250106-191353

On Quick or Slow Speech

a *Onc ne furent à tous toutes graces données.*[1]

Never have all talents been given to all. • LB, Vers, 14

a We see this, in fact, with the gift of eloquence: some have ease and speed, and are quick on the draw, so to speak, and always ready to shoot; others are slower and never say anything they have not prepared and thought about. If I were to advise anyone — the same way we advise women on sports and exercises according to their best features — on the advantages of these two types of eloquence of which, nowadays, it seems lawyers and preachers make the most use, I would argue that the slow kind fits the preacher and the other, the lawyer. The responsibilities of the former give them plenty of time to prepare. And their work proceeds, one thing at a time, without interruption. Meanwhile, with lawyers, their responsibilities are such that they must appear in court all the time; and once there, the unpredictable arguments of their opponents are sure to break their momentum and force them to find new strategies on the spot.

a Things turned out differently in Marseille, however, when Pope Clement met with King Francis.[2] Sir Guillaume Poyet, a man of excellent reputation with a lifetime of experience as a lawyer, had been chosen to speak before the pope and had been thinking about his remarks well beforehand. Some say he had even come from Paris with all of it ready. On the day Poyet was to give his speech, the pope worried that some of the ambassadors of the princes gathered around him might be offended by it and sent the king the point he thought most appropriate to the time and place. Unfortunately, it was so different from what Poyet had worked on that his speech was of no use now. He had to come up with another one quickly but felt overwhelmed by the task and Cardinal du Bellay had to do it for him.[3]

b Lawyers do have it harder than preachers. Yet, as far as I know, there are more acceptable lawyers than preachers, at least in France.

a Wit, it seems, naturally works at a quick and sudden pace while intelligence works slowly and carefully. Either way, someone who cannot say a word unless they have had time to think is nearly as unheard of as someone who does not sound smarter with some preparation. They say

of Severus Cassius that his speeches were better the less he thought about them, that he owed more to luck than to his diligence, and that he benefited from getting worked up while he spoke, to the extent that his opponents made sure not to provoke him for fear that anger should make him twice as eloquent. I am well acquainted with this natural disposition, with how burdened it is by thorough and laborious forethought. If it cannot be easy and free, it is of little use. We sometimes say that someone's work stinks of lamp oil and soot for the coarseness and toughness that too much effort imparts to it. Desire to do good work, as well as the tension of a soul overly focused on and pressured by its objective, can also hinder and stop it, like water only trickles out of a bottle when too much of it is poured too quickly.

a This natural disposition of which I speak does not need to be goaded and spurred on by strong emotions, like Cassius's anger (because that energy would be too rough). But sometimes it needs to be not shaken but nudged. It wants to be stirred and roused by outside occurrences, the experience of unexpected things. When it walks alone, it drags its feet and dawdles. When it is engaged, it comes alive and blossoms.

b I am not a very collected and deliberate person. With me, chance seems to be in charge. The occasion, the company, the sound of my voice even, get more out of me than pondering and racking my brains on my own does.

a That is why my conversation is better than my writing, if anything can be said to be better where there is not much of value.

c One more thing about me: I am never where I go looking for myself and am more likely to stumble upon my thoughts than to reason my way to them. Suppose I put something clever down in writing. (I am aware that my clever is someone else's dull. No matter! To each according to their strength.) I lose track of it and soon have no idea of what I meant to say. And someone else may get there before I do. But if I were to cut everything that occurred to me this way, I would have nothing left. I may hit upon it again, its meaning clear as day this time, and wonder how I could have missed it.

Notes

1 Montaigne's friend, Étienne de La Boétie, is the author of this verse. La Boétie's poetry was published posthumously by Montaigne himself in 1571.

2 Pope Clement VII met with Francis I in Marseille in October 1533 to celebrate the marriage of Henri II, son of Francis I, to Catherine de' Medici, the pope's niece.

3 In du Bellay's *Mémoires*, from which Montaigne's account is derived, Poyet must deliver his speech in Latin when the pope and the king of France meet. Although he is an excellent lawyer and speaker, his knowledge of Latin is not good enough for the occasion and colleagues in Paris help

him prepare or translate it. But he is alone in Marseille when the pope requests a different one and worries, therefore, that he cannot rewrite it.

Montaigne's Sources

Du Bellay, Mem.	Du Bellay, Martin, *Mémoires*
LB, Vers	La Boétie, Étienne de, *Vers François*