

Essays, Book III

Michel de Montaigne

1588

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type. —Montaigne kept adding to this work. Following most modern editions, the present version uses tags in the following way:

[A]: material in the first edition (1580) or added soon thereafter; there is none of this in Book III,

[B]: material added in the greatly enlarged second edition (1588),

[C]: material added in the first posthumous edition (1595) following Montaigne's notes in his own copy.

The tags are omitted where they seem unimportant. The ones that are retained are kept very small to make them neglectable by readers who aren't interested in those details. —The footnotes are all editorial. —Montaigne's spellings of French words are used in the glossary and in references in the text to the glossary. —In the original, all the quotations from Latin writers are given in Latin.

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Glossary

colic: Translates *cholique*. Severe abdominal pain, perhaps accompanied by diarrhoea. In Montaigne's case it was essentially connected with his **stone**, q.v.

Conquistador: A leader in the Spanish conquest of Mexico and Peru in the 16th century (Spanish for 'conqueror').

coutume: Where the *coutume* is social, it is translated as 'custom'; where it is individual, as 'habit'.

Cupid: Several occurrences of this, especially in Essay 5, are translations of *amour*.

dare: This translates *oser*, which can also be translated less strenuously as 'venture'.

essai: An *essai* (French) may be a test, or an attempt, or an exercise, or a certain kind of literary production. The last meaning came solely from Montaigne's way of labelling these 'attempts' or 'exercises' of his, and occasionally in the text there is some play on the word.

friendship: Translates *amitié*. Sometimes, for example on page 108, it means something much stronger, such as 'loving relationship'. Similarly with *ami* and 'friend'.

gravel: Translates *grave*, *gravele*, and *sable*, which could be 'sand'. It means about the same as **stone**, q.v.

honest man: Used as a stop-gap substitute for *honneste homme*, which Montaigne is using in an old sense: 'man of the world, agreeable and marked by his manners and also by his intelligence and knowledge' [Petit Robert dictionary]. Perhaps 'honest women' (*honestes femmes*) on page 22 should be understood in the same way.

magistrate: In this work, 'a magistrate' is any official who applies the law; 'the magistrate' of a given nation is its system of such officials.

moeurs: The *moeurs* of a people include their morality, their basic customs, their attitudes and expectations about how people will behave, their ideas about what is decent. . . and so on. This word—rhyming approximately with 'worse'—is left untranslated because there's no good English equivalent to it. The Oxford *English* dictionary includes it for the same reason it has for including *Schadenfreude*.

munificence: Splendid liberality in giving [OED].

prince: Like the English 'prince', this in early modern times could refer to any rank up to that of king (or monarch; Queen Elizabeth I referred to herself as a 'prince'). The word is translated by 'prince' throughout.

science: Translated as 'branch of learning' or simply 'learning', except in a few cases where those seem stylistically impossible. Then 'science' is used, but it never means anything much like 'science' in our sense.

spiritual: Translates *spirituel*, an adjective whose cognate noun is *esprit*, which can mean 'spirit' but also mean 'mind' or 'intellect'. So occurrences of the adjective should be viewed with caution.

stone: This refers to kidney-stones, an affliction from which Montaigne suffered grievously; a major topic of the final essay.

vanity, vain(ly): Regularly used to translate *vanité* and its cognates, though in Montaigne's usage *vanité* means 'emptiness', 'triviality' or the like more often than it means what 'vanity' does to us. See especially Essay 9.

1. The useful and the honourable

[B] No one is free from uttering stupidities. The misfortune is to say them very carefully.

'Of course that man will take great pains to say enormous trifles!' [Terence].

That does not apply to me. My trifles escape me as casually as they deserve. All the better for them. I would part with them at once, however low their price. I do not buy and sell them except for what they weigh. I speak on paper exactly as I do in casual conversation. What follows is proof of that!

Is there anyone for whom treachery should not be detestable, when Tiberius rejected it at great cost to himself. His people in Germany sent word him that, if he approved, they would rid him of Arminius by poison. (Arminius was the most powerful enemy the Romans had; he had humiliated them under Varus, and alone was preventing Tiberius from extending his dominion over that territory.) He replied that the Roman people were accustomed to avenging themselves on their enemies openly, weapons in hand, not covertly by trickery. He renounced what was useful for what was honourable.

You will tell me that he was a hypocrite. I believe he was—hardly a miracle in someone in his profession! But a profession of virtue does not lose force by coming from a man who hates it; indeed truth forces the profession out of him, and even if he doesn't welcome virtue inwardly he decorates himself with it.

Our structure, both in public and in private, is full of imperfection. But there is nothing useless in nature—not even uselessness. Nothing works its way into this universe without having an appropriate place in it. Each of us is *held together* by bad qualities. Ambition, jealousy, envy,

vengeance, superstition and despair lodge in us with such a natural right of possession that we recognise the likeness of them even in the animals too—indeed, even the unnatural vice of cruelty; for in the midst of compassion we feel within us some sort of bitter-sweet pricking of malicious pleasure at seeing others suffer. Even children feel it: 'Sweet it is during a tempest when the gales lash the waves to watch from the shore another man's great striving' [Lucretius].

Anyone who removed the seeds of such qualities in man would be destroying the basic conditions of our life. So too in any political management there are things that *have to be done* and that are not merely abject but vicious as well. Vices have their place here; they are used to develop the ties that bind us together, just as poisons are used to preserve our health. If they become excusable because we have need of them, and their necessity effaces their true qualities, we must leave that role—the performing of vicious acts that are needed for social well-being—to be played by citizens who are more vigorous and less timorous and are prepared to sacrifice their honour and their consciences, as men in ancient times sacrificed their lives for the well-being of their country. The rest of us, being weaker, accept roles that are easier and less dangerous. The public interest requires men to betray, to tell lies [C] and to massacre; [B] let us resign that commission to people who are more obedient and more pliant.

I have certainly been moved to anger at seeing judges engage in shameless trickery, using fraud and false hopes of favour or of pardon to tempt criminals to reveal what they have done. It would be helpful to justice (and to Plato, too, who is in favour of that practice) to provide me with other methods, more in keeping with myself. Such 'justice' is malicious, and I think that malice harms justice as much anything does. Not long ago, when asked about my attitude

to such matters, I replied that I would hardly be one to betray my Prince for a private citizen when I would be deeply grieved to betray any private citizen for my Prince; and just as I hate to deceive, I also hate others to be deceived about me. I am unwilling even to provide matter or occasion for it. In the little I have had to do with negotiations between our princes during these disputes and sub-disputes that tear us apart these days, I have carefully avoided letting anyone be mistaken about me or getting entangled in my mask. Those in the business—professional negotiators—keep themselves well covered, doing their best to counterfeit a moderate and conciliatory attitude. As for me, I present myself through my liveliest opinions and in the manner that is most truly mine—a green and tender negotiator who would rather fail in my mission than let myself down. I have been very lucky so far—and luck certainly plays the major part in this; few men have gone from one group to another with less suspicion or more favour and courtesy.

I have an open manner that easily insinuates itself and is trusted from the first encounter. At any time in history, naturalness and simple truth always find their time and their place. And then frank speech is less suspect or offensive in men who are not working for some private gain and who can truthfully say as Hyperides did when Athenians complained of his harsh way of speaking: ‘Gentlemen, do not consider only my frankness but that I am frank without having anything to gain, without restoring my own fortunes.’ My own frankness has quickly freed me too from suspicion of deceitfulness, by its vigour. . . .and also by presenting itself as simple and casual. All I want to gain from doing anything is doing it; I do not attach long consequences and purposes; each thing I do plays its game separately; let it win if it can.

I feel, by the way, no driving passion of love or hatred toward the great; my will has not been throttled by private

injury or obligation. ^[C] I view our kings with the simple loyal affection of a subject, neither encouraged nor discouraged by personal interest. I am pleased with myself over that. ^[B] I am devoted to public affairs when they are just, but only moderately and calmly. . . . Anger and hatred go beyond the duty of justice; they are passions that serve only those who are not held to their duty by reason alone. All legitimate and equitable purposes are inherently fair and temperate; otherwise they slide into sedition and disloyalty. That is what makes me stride forward, head erect, open-faced and open-hearted.

Indeed I am not afraid to admit that if there were a need for it I would readily. . . .offer a candle to St Michael and another to his dragon. I shall follow the good side as far as the fire, but no further if I can avoid it. Let Montaigne, my home, be engulfed in the collapse of the commonwealth if need be; but if it does not need to be, I shall be grateful to fortune for its preservation. Was it not Herodes Atticus who held to the just side, the losing side, yet saved himself by his moderation in that universal shipwreck of the world among so many schisms and upheavals?

It is easier for private men such as he was; and I find that in that kind of turmoil one is entitled not to be ambitious to get involved and push oneself forward. But I find that to remain vacillating and half-and-half, keeping one’s affections in check, unmoved by civil strife and public disputes in one’s own country, is neither handsome nor honourable. ^[C] ‘That is not the way of moderation: it is no way at all. It is simply awaiting the outcome so as to support those who happen to win.’ ^[Liv] That may be permissible towards the affairs of neighbouring countries: Gelon, the tyrant of Syracuse, refrained from supporting either side in the war of the Barbarians against the Greeks, keeping an envoy in readiness at Delphi bearing gifts, on the lookout for which

side fortune would favour, so as to form a prompt alliance with the victor. But it would be a kind of treason to act thus in civil strife at home, in which ^[B] one *must* decide to join one side or other. But for a man who is not under pressure from any official responsibility or explicit command I find it to more excusable for him to keep out of the strife (though it's not an excuse I make for myself), except in the case of foreign wars. . . . Nevertheless, even those who become totally committed can still do so with such order and moderation that the storm should pass over their heads without harm. Did we not have reason to hope for this in the case of the late bishop of Orleans, the sieur de Morvilliers? And among those who are struggling valiantly right now, I know some whose *mœurs* [see Glossary] are so equable or so gentle that they are likely to remain upright, whatever destructive upheavals and collapses heaven may have in store for us.

I hold that it is for kings alone to feel animosity towards kings; and I laugh at folk who light-heartedly enter into such disproportionate quarrels. For a man who fulfills his honour and his duty by marching openly and courageously against a monarch is not pursuing a *private quarrel* with him; if he does not love that great person, he does something better—he *esteems* him. And there is always this in favour of the cause of the laws and of the defence of the existing state that even those who are disturbing it for their personal ends do not condemn those who defend it, though they do not honour them. But inward bitter harshness born of self-interested passion should not be called *duty*, as it commonly is, and malicious and treacherous dealings should not be called *courage*. What they call *zeal* is their propensity to wickedness and violence; what sets them ablaze is not the cause but self-interest; they kindle war not because it is just but because it is war.

Nothing stops us from behaving properly and in good faith

even when among men who are enemies to one another. In that situation, conduct yourself not with an •equal good-will (for good-will can allow of varying degrees) but at least with a •temperate one that won't get you so involved with one of the hostile parties that it can demand everything of you. And be satisfied with a moderate degree of their favour, gliding through troubled waters without trying to fish in them!

The other way, namely offering all one's service to this side *and* to that, savours even less of prudence than it does of morality. The man to whom you betray another with whom you are on equally good terms—doesn't he know that you will do the same to him in turn? He regards you as a wicked man; but he listens to you, pumps you, turns your treachery to his advantage. Double-dealers are useful for what they *bring*, but there's a need for care that they *take away* as little as possible.

I never say anything to one side that I cannot say to the other when the time comes, merely changing the emphasis a little. I report only things that are irrelevant to the current conflict, or already known, or useful to both sides. There is no advantage for which I would permit myself to lie to them. I scrupulously conceal whatever has been entrusted to my silence, but I carry as little into concealment as I can. The secrets of princes are a troublesome burden when one has no use for them. I freely offer this bargain: they entrust little to me, but they absolutely trust what I bring to them. I have always known more about these matters than I wanted to.

^[C] An open way of speaking opens up another man's speech and draws it out, as do wine and love.

^[B] Phillipides replied wisely to King Lysimachus who asked him 'Which of my possessions shall I share with you?'—'Whatever you like, provided it is none of your secrets.'

I notice that everyone rebels if the deeper implications of the negotiations he is employed on are concealed from

him and if some ulterior motive is hidden from him. As for me, I am glad not to be told more than I am expected to *use*; I do not want my knowledge to exceed and constrain my speech. If I must serve as a means of deception, at least let my conscience be clear. I do not want to be regarded as such a loyal or loving servant that I would be thought fit to betray anyone. Someone who is unfaithful to himself is excusable for being unfaithful to his master.

But these are princes who will not accept men halfway, and scorn services limited by conditions. There is no remedy for this. I frankly tell them my limits; the only thing I should be a slave to is reason, and I can scarcely manage even that. [C] They are wrong to require a free man to be as abjectly bound to their service as a man they have made and bought or one whose fortune is expressly and individually tied to theirs.

[B] The laws have saved me a great deal of trouble; they have chosen my party for me and given me a master; any other superiority and obligation must be relative to that one and restrained by it. That does not mean that if my affection carried me in another direction, I would immediately go there with my support. Our will and our desires are laws unto themselves, but our actions must accept public law.

This way of proceeding of mine does not quite fit our customs; it is not made to achieve great effects or to endure very long. Innocence itself could not negotiate among us without dissimulation or bargain without without lying. So public employments are not my quarry; whenever my profession requires them of me, I carry them out in the most private way I can. As a boy I was plunged in them up to my ears, with success; but I got out of that in good time. Since then I have often avoided getting involved in public employments, rarely accepted them, never asked for them; . . . and yet my not having embarked on such a career owes less to my

resolve than to my good fortune. For there are paths that are less inimical to my taste and more in conformity with my capacities that fortune *could have* summoned me to follow towards political service and growing worldly prestige; and if it had done so, I know I would have over-ridden my reasoned arguments and answered its call.

There are those who say, against what I profess, that my frankness, simplicity and naturalness in my *mœurs* are mere skill and cunning, prudence rather than goodness, artifice rather than nature, good sense rather than good luck;

they give me more honour than they take from me. They certainly make my cunning *too* cunning. If anyone follows and watches me closely, I will hand him the victory if he does not admit that his sect has no rule that could counterfeit my natural way of proceeding and keep up an appearance of liberty and licence maintained so uniformly along such tortuous paths. . . . The way of truth is **one** and artless; the way of private gain and success in one's personal business is **double**, uneven and random.

I have often seen that counterfeit artificial frankness in practice, but most often without success. It brings to mind Aesop's ass which tried to copy the dog by gaily throwing both its forefeet onto its master's shoulders; but the caresses the dog received for such a show of affection were outnumbered by the blows given to the wretched ass. [C] 'What best becomes a man is whatever is most peculiarly his own.' [Cicero] [B] I don't want to deprive deceit of its proper place; to do that would be to misunderstand the world. I know that it has often served profitably and that it feeds and maintains most of men's occupations. There are lawful vices, just there are many actions that are good or pardonable though unlawful.

Inherent justice that is **a** natural and **b** universal is ordered differently and more nobly than the other sort of

justice that is **b** particular to one nation and **a** constrained by our political necessities. ^[c] 'We have no solid and exact image of true law and absolute justice; we use mere sketches and shadows.' [Cicero]

(^[B] So that when the sage Dandamis heard tell of the lives of Socrates, Pythagoras and Diogenes, he judged them to be great men in every way except for their excessive veneration for the laws, to authorize and support which true virtue must give up much of its original vigour.)

Many vicious deeds are done not merely with the laws' permission but at their instigation. ^[c] 'There are crimes authorised by decrees of the Senate and by popular votes' [Seneca]. ^[B] I follow the ordinary usage that differentiates between useful things and honourable things; so that some natural actions that are not only useful but necessary are called dishonourable and foul.

But let us continue our examples of treachery. Two claimants to the kingdom of Thrace had fallen into a quarrel over their rights. The Emperor stopped them from coming to blows; but one of them, under the pretext of a meeting to establish an amicable relation between them, invited his rival to an entertainment in his house—where he had him imprisoned and killed. Justice required that the Romans should get satisfaction for this crime, but difficulty blocked the ordinary way of doing so. What they could not do lawfully without war and hazard they therefore undertook to do by treachery. What they could not do 'honourably' they did 'usefully'. A certain Pomponius Flaccus was found fit to do the work. After drawing the other into his net by deceitful words and assurances, instead of the honour and favour he had promised him he dispatched him to Rome bound hand and foot. Here we have one traitor betraying another, which goes against the usual pattern, for traitors

are full of mistrust and it is hard to catch them out by cunning like their own—witness the painful experience we have just had. [It is not clear what this refers to. It cannot be the 1572 Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre: the victims there were *innocent* protestants who *were* tricked into coming to Paris; doubly unlike what Montaigne has just been talking about.]

Let him who will be a Pomponius Flaccus—and there are plenty who will. In my case, my word and my honour are working parts of our commonwealth, along with all the rest; their best work is in public service; I take that as granted. But if I were ordered to take charge of the Palace of Justice and its lawsuits, I would reply: 'I know nothing at all about such things'; if ordered to take charge of a corps of pioneers [= 'military engineers and ditch-diggers'], I would say: 'I am called to a more worthy role.' Similarly if anyone wanted to employ me to lie, to betray and to perjure myself in some important cause (even if not to assassinate or poison), I would say 'If I have robbed anyone or stolen anything, send me rather to the galleys.' It is lawful for a man of honour to speak as the Spartans did when, defeated by Antipater, they were agreeing terms with him: 'You may command us to accept conditions which are as grievous and as damaging as you please; but if you command us to do shameful and dishonourable things, you will be wasting your time.'

(Each of us ought to have sworn to himself the oath the kings of Egypt made their judges solemnly swear: that as judges they would never deviate from their conscience for any command that even they, their kings, might give.)

In such a commission there is an evident sign of ignominy and condemnation; the one who gives it to you is condemning you; properly understood, he is giving it to you as an accusation and a punishment. The better public affairs are through your activities, the worse things are for you: the better you do, the worse you do. If the very man who set

you the task punished you for performing it—well, there are precedents for that, and even some appearance of justice.

^[C] In a particular case perfidy may be excusable, but only when used to betray and punish perfidy. ^[B] There are plenty of treacherous deeds that have been not only disowned but punished by the very ones on whose behalf they were perpetrated. Who does not know the judgement Fabricius pronounced against Pyrrhus's physician? ^[The doctor wrote to Fabricius offering to poison Pyrrhus, to whom Fabricius forwarded the letter, telling him to choose his friends better.] But further still, there are cases when the very one who ordered the deed has exacted rigorous revenge on the man he employed to do it, disclaiming such unbridled authority and power and disowning such an abandoned and cowardly servility and obedience.

A Russian duke called Jaropelc bribed an Hungarian nobleman to betray •King Boleslaus of Poland, either by killing him or by providing the Russians with the means of doing him some significant harm. The Hungarian acted the carefully courteous man and devoted himself more than before to the service of •the king; he succeeded in becoming one of his council and one of his most trusted men. Taking advantage of this, and choosing an opportune moment when his master was absent, he betrayed Wielickzka to the Russians; that great and flourishing city was entirely sacked and burnt by them; with the slaughter not only of the city's entire population of all ages and both sexes but also of a large number of neighbouring nobles whom he had assembled there for that purpose. Jaropelc, his vengeance and his anger assuaged—and they were not unjustified, since Boleslaus had greatly injured him in a similar manner—was satiated by the fruits of that treacherous deed. He came to reflect on its naked, simple ugliness, seeing it with a sane vision and no longer obscured by passion; he was seized with

such remorse and revulsion that he had his agent's eyes put out, and his tongue and private parts cut off.

^[Montaigne now cites four more cases in which treacherous behaviour is brutally punished by the person whose persuasion, bribery or authority caused it to happen in the first place. Then:] ^[B] Even to worthless men, after profiting from a vicious deed, it is very sweet to be able from then on to fasten on it some mark of goodness and of justice, as though their conscience wanted to make up for it and put things right. ^[C] To which may be added the fact that the agents of such horrific wickedness are a reproach to them [i.e. to the **a** instigators, not the actual **b** agents]; so **a** they seek through **b** their deaths to smother any knowledge witnessing to such proceedings.

^[B] Now, even if you do get rewarded for a base act—an extreme and desperate remedy required by public necessity—the one who rewards you will nevertheless regard you as a man accursed and abominable, unless he is so himself. And he will think you a worse traitor than does the man you betrayed; for it is with your own hands. . . .that you prove to him the malevolence of your heart. He employs you just as we do those degraded men who carry out capital punishment—a task as useful as it is shameful. Apart from the baseness of such commissions, there is the prostitution of one's conscience. Because Sejanus's daughter was a virgin and therefore not punishable by death according to Roman law, the executioner made space for the law to apply by raping her before he strangled her. Not only his hand but his soul is a slave to public convenience.

^[C] When Amurath I, to increase the severity of his punishment of those subjects who had supported the parricidal rebellion of his son against him, ordered that their closest kin should take part in their execution, I find it very honourable in some of them who, •by refusing to do this•, preferred to

be unjustly held guilty of another's ·attempted· parricide rather than to serve justice by a parricide of their own. And in my own time when I have seen some rabble, after we have stormed their wretched hovels, saving their own lives in return for the hanging of their friends and relatives, I have always regarded them as worse than those who were hanged.

It is said that in former days Prince Vitold of Lithuania proclaimed as law that condemned criminals must execute their sentences by their own hand, finding it monstrous that a third party, who was innocent of their crime, should be burdened with the task of homicide.

^[B] When some urgent necessity or some violent unforeseeable event affecting the needs of the state makes a prince deviate from his word and his faith, or otherwise forces him from his ordinary duty, he should consider this necessity as a scourging by the rod of God; it is not a vice, for he has abandoned his own reason for a more powerful and universal one; but it is indeed a misfortune. So when I was asked, 'What remedy is there?' I replied, 'None: if the prince was really torn between those two extremes, then he had to do it. But if he had no regrets about doing it, if it did not weigh upon him, then that is a sign that his conscience is in a bad way.' [Between those two sentences, Montaigne inserts ^[C] 'But let him beware that he is not seeking a pretext for perjury' (Cicero).]. . . .

Those are dangerous examples, rare and sickly exceptions to our natural rules. They should be yielded to, but with great moderation and circumspection. No •private good is worth our doing such violence to our consciences. The •public good?—yes, when it is very obvious and important.

^[C] Timoleon sheltered himself from the monstrous quality of his deed, remembering that he had killed the tyrant with the hand of a brother; and it rightly pricked his conscience that he had had to purchase the common good at the price of his *mœurs*. Even the ·Corinthian· Senate, which he had

freed from slavery ·by killing his brother·, dared not plainly make up its mind about such a prominent action that was split between two weighty and contrary aspects. But when the citizens of Syracuse at that very moment sent to beg protection from the Corinthians, asking for a leader worthy of restoring their city to its former splendour and of cleansing Sicily of the many petty tyrants who were oppressing it, the Senators chose Timoleon for this task, declaring—a new evasion!—that their decision would be •in favour of the liberator of his country or •against the murderer of his brother depending on whether he did well or badly in this new task.

This fanciful decision has some excuse in the dangerous nature of the case and the complexity of the action in question. And they did well to free their judgement of the burden it imposed, or to base it on some other independent considerations. Now, Timoleon's conduct during that expedition soon threw light on his case, so worthily and so virtuously did he act in every way; and the good fortune that accompanied him during the hardships he had to overcome in that noble task seemed to them to have been sent by the gods, united in favour of vindicating him.

If ever an aim was worthy of pardon, that aim was Timoleon's. But ·not every 'public necessity' has such weight·. The usefulness of increasing the public revenue. . . .is not strong enough to warrant such an injustice. [He illustrates this with a 'filthy' thing the Roman Senate did in the second century BCE.]

Civil wars often produce base examples of our punishing private citizens for believing in us when we were different; the magistrate inflicts the penalty for his own change of mind on someone who had nothing to do with it; the master whips his pupil for being teachable; the guide whips his blind man. Horrible image of justice!

Some rules in philosophy are false and weak. An example is presented to us to show private usefulness ·morally·prevailing over a formal promise because of special features of the case:

Thieves have captured you; they have set you free after exacting from you an oath to pay a certain sum.

But the special features don't succeed in this. It is wrong to say (·as some do·) that a good man, once out of their hands, will be free of his promise. He is nothing of the sort! What fear has once made me will, I am bound to go on willing when the fear is over. And if fear merely forced my tongue without my will, I am still bound to pay the promised sum down to the last farthing. As for me, when I have carelessly let my tongue get ahead of my thoughts, it has been a matter of conscience for me not to disavow it. Otherwise, we will gradually reach the point where it will overthrow *any* right that someone else acquires by our promises and our oaths. . . . Private interest excuses our breaking a promise if, but only if, what we promised is wicked and iniquitous in itself; for the right of virtue should prevail over the right of our obligation.

I have already placed Epaminondas among the foremost ranks of outstanding men,¹ and I do not retract that. How far would he go, out of consideration for his private duty? He was someone who

- never killed a man he had vanquished;
- scrupled to kill a tyrant or his accomplices without due form of law, even for the inestimable good of restoring freedom to his country; and who
- judged a man to be wicked—however good a citizen he might be—if he did not spare his friend and host among his enemies even in battle.

A richly complex soul! To the harshest and most violent of hu-

man activities he married goodness and humanity—indeed the most delicate to be found in the school of philosophy. That heart so great, full and obstinate against pain, death and poverty: was it nature or art that made it tender to the point of such extreme gentleness and kindness of disposition? Terrible with blood and sword, he goes smashing and shattering a nation that no-one could beat but him, and *turns aside* in the thick of the melee when he encounters his friend and host. Truly that man was in command of war when he subjected it to the curb of *kindness* at the highest point of its most blazing ardour, all enflamed as it was and foaming with frenzy and slaughter. It is a miracle to mingle such actions with a semblance of justice; but it was for the strength of Epaminondas alone to mingle them with the gentle ease of the mildest *mœurs* and pure innocence.

Where one man [Pompey] said to the Mammertines that statute-law did not apply to men under arms, another [Caesar] told the Tribune of the People that the times of war and of justice were two different things, and a third [Marius] declared that the noise of weapons prevented him from hearing the voice of the laws, Epaminondas was never prevented from hearing the laws of civility and pure courtesy. Had he not borrowed from his enemies the practice of sacrificing to the Muses as he went to war, so as to temper by their gentleness and gaiety the harshness and frenzy of military activities?

After such a great preceptor, let us not fear to think •_[C] that some things are unlawful even when done to enemies, that •_[B] that the common interest cannot require all men to sacrifice all private interest always—

_[C] 'the memory of individual rights subsisting even in the strife of public discord' [Livy]; _[B] 'No power can authorise treachery against a friend' [Ovid]

¹ 'The Most Excellent of Men', essay 36 in Book 2.

—and •that not all things are permissible for an honourable man in the service of his king or of the cause of the commonwealth and its laws. [C] ‘The claims of our country are not paramount over all other duties: it is good for it to have citizens who are dutiful to their kindred’ [Cicero].

[B] It is a lesson proper to the times. We have no need to harden our hearts with these plates of iron; it is enough to harden our shoulders; it is enough to dip our pens in ink without dipping them in blood. If it is greatness of heart and the effect of rare and singular virtue to despise friendship, private obligations, our word and kinship, for the common good and obedience to the magistrate [see Glossary], then for us to decline such ‘greatness’ it suffices that it cannot find lodging within the greatness of mind of Epaminondas.

I loathe the frenetic exhortations of that other disordered soul: ‘While your weapons flash, let no thought of duty to your parents move you, nor the sight of your fathers on the other side; slash with your swords at the faces you should venerate.’ [Lucan; the speaker is supposed to be Julius Caesar.] Let us deprive wicked, bloody and treacherous natures of this pretext of reason. Let us cast aside such monstrous and deranged justice and cling to models that are more humane. How much time and example can do! In an encounter in the civil war against Cinna, one of Pompey’s soldiers unwittingly killed his brother who was on the opposite side; from shame and sorrow, he killed himself on the spot. And a few years later, in another civil war of the same people, a soldier asked his commanders for a reward for killing his brother.

It is wrong to argue for an action’s honour and beauty from its usefulness, and to conclude that that is obligatory and honourable for everyone to perform an action if it is useful: [C] ‘Not everything is fit for every man alike’ [Propertius].

[B] Let us select the most necessary, the most useful activity of human society: that will be marriage. Yet the

council of saints finds the contrary way more honourable, and excludes from marriage the most venerable vocation, just as we assign to stud the horses we value least.

2. Repentance

[B] Others *form* man; I give an account of him, and portray a man who is very badly formed and whom I would truly make quite different from what he is if I had to fashion him afresh. But it is done now. The brush-strokes of my portrait do not go astray, though they do change and vary. The world is but a perennial seesaw. Everything in it—the land, the mountains of the Caucasus, the pyramids of Egypt—all waver with their own particular motion and with the common motion. Stability is merely a more languid motion.

I cannot *fix* my subject: it goes along befuddled and staggering, with a natural drunkenness. I grasp it as it is now, at this moment when I am occupied with it. I do not portray *being*. I portray *passing*: not the passing from one age to another (or, in popular parlance, from seven years to seven years), but from day to day, from minute to minute. The account of myself must be adapted to the passing hour. I may change soon, not only by chance but also by intention. This is a register of varied and changing occurrences and of ideas that are irresolute and sometimes even contradictory—either because I myself have become different or because I grasp hold of different attributes or aspects of my subjects. So I may happen to contradict myself but. . . I never contradict truth. If my soul could find a footing, I would not be trying myself out but resolving myself.

But it is always in apprenticeship and on trial. The life I am expounding is humble and lacklustre; that doesn’t matter.

The whole of moral philosophy can be tied to a commonplace private life as well as it can to a life of richer stuff. Each man bears the whole *form* of the human condition. ^[C] Authors communicate with the public by •some special extrinsic mark; I do so •by my entire being, not as a grammarian, poet or jurist but as Michel de Montaigne. I am the first to do this. If the world complains that I talk too much about myself, I complain that it does not even *think* about itself.

^[B] But is it reasonable that I who am so private in actual life should offer to make public this knowledge of myself? Also, is it reasonable that I should present to the world—where grooming and artifice have so much credit and authority—the crude and simple products of nature, and of a very feeble nature at that? Writing a book without knowledge or skill—isn't that like building a wall without stone? Musical fancies are guided by art; mine, by chance.

At least I have *this* that conforms to the rules •of sound teaching•: no man ever treated a subject that he knew or understood better than I know and understand the one I have undertaken; in that subject I am the most learned man alive! Secondly, no man ever ^[C] penetrated more deeply into his material, or plucked its limbs and consequences cleaner, or ^[B] reached more precisely or more fully the goal he had set for his project. To accomplish it, I only need to bring fidelity to it; and it is there, as sincere and pure as can be found. I tell the truth, not as much as I could but as much as I dare—and as I grow older I dare a little more, for it seems that custom allows old age a greater licence to prattle, and more indiscretion in talking about oneself. What I often find happening cannot happen here, namely that the craftsman and his work contradict each other: 'Has a man whose conversation is so decent written such a stupid book?' or 'Can such learned writings come from a man whose conversation is so weak?'

^[C] When a man is commonplace in discussion yet excellent in writing, that means that his talents lie in his borrowed sources not in himself. A learned man is not learned in all fields: but a capable man is capable in all fields, even in ignorance. ^[B] Here, my book and I go harmoniously forward at the same pace. Elsewhere you can commend or condemn a work independently of its author; not here: touch one and you touch the other. Anyone who judges concerning it without knowing it will harm himself more than me; anyone who does know it has satisfied me completely. I shall be blessed beyond my merit if public approval will allow me this much: that I have made intelligent people feel that I was capable of profiting from knowledge if I had had any, and that I deserved better help from my memory.

Let us excuse me for •repeating myself•, saying what I often say: that I rarely repent ^[C] and that my conscience is happy with itself—not like the conscience of an angel or of a horse but like the conscience of a man—^[B] always adding this refrain (not a ritual one but one of simple and fundamental submission): that I speak as an ignorant inquirer; for solutions I purely and simply abide by the common authorised beliefs. I am not teaching, I am telling.

Every vice that is truly a vice is odious and is condemned by a sound judgement; for there is so much evident ugliness and impropriety in it that perhaps the people are right who maintain that vice is principally the product of stupidity and ignorance, so hard it is to imagine that anyone could know it without loathing it.

^[C] Malice swallows most of its own venom and poisons itself with it. ^[B] Vice leaves repentance in the soul like an ulcer in the flesh, forever scratching itself and bleeding. For reason *effaces* other griefs and sorrows, but it *engenders* that of repentance, which is all the more grievous for being born within us, just as •the chill and the burn of our fevers

are more stinging than •those that come to us from outside. I regard as vices (though each according to its measure) not only those that are condemned by reason and nature but even those that have been are condemned by the opinions of men, even when these are false or erroneous, provided that law and custom lend them their authority.

Likewise, every good deed brings joy to a well-born nature. There is an indescribable delight in acting well, which makes us inwardly rejoice; a warm-hearted feeling of pride accompanies a good conscience. A boldly vicious soul can perhaps achieve composure, but it can never achieve such satisfaction and happiness with itself. It is no light pleasure to know oneself to be preserved from the contagion of such a corrupt age ·as ours·, and to say of oneself:

‘Anyone who could see right into my soul would still not find me guilty of

- any man’s ruin or affliction, or of
- envy or vengeance, or of
- any public attack on our laws, or of
- innovation or disturbance, or of
- breaking my word.

And despite what this licentious age allows and even teaches each of us, I have not put my hand onto the property or into the purse of any Frenchman; I have lived by my own means, in war as in peace; nor have I exploited any man’s labour without due reward.’

These testimonies of **one’s own** conscience are pleasant; and this natural rejoicing is a great blessing and the only reward that never fails us. Looking to the approval of **others** as a reward for virtuous actions is relying on something too uncertain and shaky. [C] The good opinion of the populace is a *dishonour*, especially in a corrupt and ignorant period like our own; whom would you trust to recognise what is really praiseworthy? God preserve me from being a decent man

according to the self-descriptions that I daily see each man give to honour himself! ‘What used to be vices have become moral acts’ [Seneca].

Certain of my friends have sometimes undertaken to put me on trial and lecture me unreservedly, doing this either on their own initiative or at my invitation; of all the services of friendship, this—for a well-formed soul—is not only the most useful but also the sweetest. I have always welcomed it with the wide-open arms of courtesy and gratitude. But to speak of it now in all conscience, I have often found in their reproaches and praises such false measure that I would hardly have done worse in acting wrongly than in acting rightly by their standards.

[B] Those of us who live private lives that are on display only to ourselves have a special need for an inner pattern to test our actions, on the basis of which we sometimes pat ourselves on the back and sometimes punish ourselves. I have my own laws and law-court to pass judgement on me, and I address myself to them more than to anything else. I indeed •restrain my actions according to the standards of others, but I •extend them according to my own. No-one but you knows whether you are base and cruel or loyal and dedicated. Others do not *see* you; they *guess at* you from uncertain conjectures; what they see is not your nature so much as your art. So do not go by their sentence; go by your own. [C] ‘You should use your own judgement of yourself.’ ‘Your own conscience gives weighty judgement on your virtues and vices; remove that and everything collapses.’ [both Cicero]

[B] But the saying that repentance follows hard upon the sin does not seem to apply to fully-fledged sin that lodges in us as in its own home. We can disown and retract the bad actions that take us by surprise and towards which we are swept by our passions; but ones that are rooted and

anchored in a strong and vigorous will cannot be denied. Repentance is nothing but a disavowal of our will and a contradiction of our whims; because that's all there is to it, it can lead us in any direction. It makes the repentant man disown his past virtue and his continence! As Horace wrote:

Why did I not want to do as a young man what I
want to do now?
Or why, thinking as I do now, cannot my radiant
cheeks return?

It is a rare life that remains well-ordered even in private. Anyone can take part in a side-show and *represent* an honest personage on the stage; but to be disciplined within, **in one's bosom** where everything is permitted and everything is hidden—that's what matters. Just one step down from that is to be so in **one's home**, in one's everyday actions for which we are not answerable to anyone; there is no striving there, no artifice. That is why Bias, portraying an excellent state of family life, says that it is one where the head of the family act indoors of his own volition in the same way that he acts outdoors for fear of the law and the comments of men. And it was a worthy response that Julius Drusus made to the workmen who offered for 3,000 crowns to re-plan his house so that his neighbours could no longer see into it: 'I will give you 6,000 to arrange for them to see in everywhere!' We note with honour Agesilaus's practice of taking up lodgings in the temples when on a journey, so that the people and even the gods could see into his private actions.

A man whose wife and manservant see nothing remarkable about him may appear to the world as a marvel. Few men have been admired by their households. ^[C] No man has been a prophet in his own home or even in his own country, says the experience of history. Likewise in things of no importance. The image of greater things can be seen in this humble example:

In my region of Gascony they think it a joke to see me in print; the further from my lair knowledge of me has spread, the more I am valued. In Guienne I pay my printers; elsewhere, they pay me.

That consideration is the motive of those who hide away when alive and present, so as to gain favour when they are dead and gone. I prefer to have less of it [i.e. of posthumous fame]; I throw myself on the world only for the share of favour I can draw from my account with it. Once I am gone, the account is closed.

^[B] The people escort that man ecstatically back to his door from a public function; he gives up that role when he takes off his robes; the higher he has climbed, the lower he falls. Inside, in his home, everything is tumultuous and vile. If there were moral order there, it would take a keen and highly selective judgement to perceive it in these low-level private actions. Besides, orderliness is a dull and sombre virtue. Storming a breach, serving as an ambassador, ruling a nation—these are •glittering deeds. Scolding, laughing, buying, selling, loving, hating, living on gentle and just terms with one's household and with oneself, not getting slack, not being false to oneself—that is •less conspicuous, but it is rarer and more difficult. So retired lives, whatever people may say, involve duties that are at least as hard and as strenuous as those of other lives. ^[C] And Aristotle says that private citizens serve virtue as highly and with as much difficulty as those who hold office. ^[B] We prepare ourselves for great occasions more for glory than for conscience. ^[C] The quickest road to glory would be to do for conscience what we do for glory. ^[B] And Alexander's virtue seems to me to show less vigour on his stage than does that of Socrates in his humble and obscure exercise of it. I can easily conceive of Socrates in Alexander's place; Alexander in that of Socrates, I cannot. Ask Alexander what he can do and

he will reply: 'Subdue the whole world.' Ask Socrates, and he will answer, 'Live the life of man in conformity with his natural condition'; knowledge which is much more general, weighty and legitimate.

The soul's value consists not in going high but in proceeding in an orderly way. ^[C] Its greatness is exercised not in greatness but in *mediocrité* [= keeping to the middle, neither high nor low]. Thus, those who judge us by the touchstone of our motives do not make much of the sparkle of our public actions, and see that these are only thin jets of fine water spurting up from muddy and thick depths; while those who judge us by this brave outward show conclude that our inward disposition corresponds to it; they cannot associate ordinary faculties like their own with those other 'amazing' faculties that are so far beyond their ken. That is why we give savage shapes to demons. And who does not give Tamberlane raised eyebrows, gaping nostrils, a ghastly face and immense size matching the size of the imaginary picture we have conceived of him from the renown of his name? If I had ever met Erasmus, it would have been hard for me not to take as adages and epigrams everything he said to his manservant or to his innkeeper's wife. We much more appropriately imagine an artisan on his toilet seat, or on his wife, than ·imagine· a great lord chancellor, venerated for his dignity and wisdom, ·in such a position·. It seems to us that they do not come down from their lofty thrones even to live.

^[B] As vicious souls are often incited to do good by some external impulse, so are virtuous souls to do evil. So souls should be judged by their settled state, when they are *at home* (if if they ever are), or at least when they are nearest to repose and to their natural position.

Natural inclinations are helped and reinforced by education, but they are scarcely to be changed or overmastered. ·To use a military metaphor·, in my lifetime hundreds of natures

have escaped towards virtue or vice through the lines of a contrary training:

As when wild beasts, shut up in a cage, forget
their forests and are tamed,
losing their menacing looks and learning to be
ruled by men,
yet if a tiny drop of blood falls on their avid lips,
back come their snarls and ragings;
they have tasted blood; their jaws yawn wide; they
are in turmoil
and can hardly be stopped from venting their
wrath on their trembling tamer. [Lucan]

We do not root out these qualities we are born with; we cover them, we conceal them. Latin is like a native tongue for me; I understand it better than French; but for forty years I have made no use of it for speaking or writing. Yet on the two or three occasions in my life when I have suffered some extreme and sudden emotion—one was when my perfectly healthy father fell back into my arms in a faint—the first words I have dredged up from my depths have always been Latin ones: ^[C] Nature breaking forcibly out and finding expression despite a long prior of disuse. ^[B] And this example applies to many others.

Those who have tried through new opinions to improve the *mœurs* of the world, of our age, reform the superficial vices; they leave the essential vices as they are, if they do not increase them. And increase is to be feared: people are ready to take a rest from all other well-doing on the strength of those uncertain surface reforms that cost less and bring more acclaim; and they thereby satisfy at little cost the other vices that are inborn, grounded in our substance, and visceral.

Just consider the evidence of this in our own experience. There is no-one who listens to himself and does not discover

in himself a pattern all his own, a ruling pattern that struggles against his education and against the storm of emotions that oppose it. For my part, I do not feel much agitation; I am virtually always *in my place*, as heavy and inert bodies are. If I am not 'at home', I am always nearby. My indulgences do not carry me very far away; there is nothing extreme or strange about them. And besides, I have bouts of healthy and vigorous reaction.

The real condemnation that applies to the common type of men nowadays is that even their retreat is full of corruption and filth, their idea of reform is blurred, and their repentance is almost as sickly and guilt-ridden as their sins. Some of them, being stuck to their vices by some natural bonding by long habit, no longer see their ugliness. There are others—and I am one of that regiment—for whom vice does have weight but who counterbalance it by the pleasure it gives or by some other factor; they put up with it and give themselves over to it at a definite price, though this still vicious and base. Yet we might imagine a counterbalancing that was so extreme that the pleasure could actually justify the sin (as we say enormous utility does), not only if the pleasure was incidental and not part of the sin, as in theft, but even where the pleasure was in the very performance of the sin, as in sexual intercourse with women, where the drive is violent and, so it is said, sometimes irresistible.

The other day when I was in Armagnac on the estate of a kinsman of mine I met a peasant whom everyone nicknames "The Thief". He gave me this account of his life: born to beggary, and finding that earning his bread by the labour of his hands would never give him enough to keep poverty at bay, he decided to become a thief, and spent his entire youth safely in that trade. He relied for this on his bodily strength: he gathered his harvest and vintage on other men's lands, but in remote locations and in such great loads that

it was inconceivable that one man could have carried so much on his shoulders in one night. He also took care to spread the damage equally, making the loss less burdensome for each of his victims. Now in his old age he is rich for a man of his station, thanks to this traffic, which he openly admits. To make his peace with God for his gains, he says •that he spends his days making benefactions to compensate the heirs of those he has robbed, and •that if he does not finish this task (for he cannot do it all at once), he will instruct his heirs to carry on with it; and all this is based not on fear of public criticism, but on the knowledge that he alone has of the harm he has done to each individual. Whether this account is true or false, it shows that this man regards theft as a dishonest deed which he hates, but not as much as he hates poverty. He indeed repents of it in itself, but does not repent of it considered as being counterbalanced and outweighed. We do not find in this case the habit that incorporates us with vice and brings even our understanding into conformity with it; nor is it the violent gale that batters and blinds our soul and for the moment sweeps us—judgement and all—into the power of vice.

I customarily do wholeheartedly whatever I do, and go my way all in one piece. I scarcely make a motion that is hidden from my reason and is not guided by the consent of almost all my parts, without schism or inner strife. The entire blame or praise for whatever I do belongs to my judgement; and any blame it once has it has for ever, because virtually since birth it has always been *one*: the same inclinations, the same route, the same strength. As for general opinions, in childhood I established myself in the position where I was to remain.

There are some impetuous, prompt, and sudden sins; let us leave them aside. But as for those other sins, so often repeated, deliberated and meditated upon—sins that

are rooted in our characters, ^[C] indeed in our professions or vocations—^[B] I cannot conceive that they should be rooted for so long in one and the same heart without the reason and conscience of the person in question constantly *wanting* them to be there; and the repentance that he claims to come to him at a certain prescribed moment is a little hard for me to imagine or conceive.

^[C] I do not subscribe to the Pythagorean doctrine that when men approach the statues of the gods to receive their oracles, they take on a new soul. Unless Pythagoras meant that their soul must actually be a new one, foreign to them and lent for the occasion, since their own soul showed so little sign of being cleansed by purification and suitable for that duty.

^[B] What they do is flat contrary to the Stoics' precepts, which do indeed command us to correct the imperfections and vices that we acknowledge to be in us, but forbid us to be gloomy or upset about them. But these men would have us believe that they do feel deep remorse and regret within; yet no amendment or improvement, or interruption, ever becomes apparent. But it is no cure if the disease is not thrown off. If repentance weighed down the scales of the balance, it would outweigh the sin. I know of no quality that is, when one's *mœurs* and life do not conform to it, so easy to counterfeit as *devotion*: its essence is abstruse and hidden, its external appearances are easy and ostentatious.

As for me, I can desire to be entirely different, I can condemn and deplore my nature as a whole, and beg God to reform me entirely and to pardon my natural frailty. But it seems to me that I should not call that 'repenting', any more than my regret at not being an angel, or not being Cato, can be called 'repenting'. My actions are ruled by what I am, and are in harmony with my social status. I cannot do better. And repentance—unlike ·mere· regret—does not

bear on things that are not within our power. I imagine countless natures loftier and better regulated than mine; but ·by imagining them· I do not amend my own capacities, any more than my arm or my intelligence become stronger because I conceive others that are. If imagining and desiring actions nobler than ours made us repent of our own, we would have to repent of our most innocent doings, since we are sure that in a more excellent nature they would have been performed with greater perfection and dignity.

When I compare my behaviour as a young man with my behaviour in old age, I find that I have usually behaved in an orderly fashion according to my lights; that is all that my *resistance* [here = 'moral fibre'] can accomplish. I do not flatter myself; in similar circumstances I would still be thus. What soils me is not a splotch but a stain that runs all through me. I have no experience of superficial, half-way, perfunctory repentance. Before I call anything 'repentance' it must affect me in every part, and must grip my bowels and afflict them as deeply and as completely as God sees into me.

In my business dealings, several good opportunities have escaped me because I did not manage them well. Yet my decisions were well chosen according to the circumstances they were faced with; their procedure is always to take the easiest and the surest course. I find that I proceeded wisely in my previous deliberations, according to my rule, given the state of the subject as set before me: and in the same circumstances I would do the same a thousand years from now. I pay no attention to what it is now, but to what it was when I was deliberating it.

^[C] The soundness of any plan depends on the time: circumstances and things continually roll about and change. I have made some grievous mistakes in my life—important ones—not through bad thinking but through bad luck. The things we deal with have secret parts, beyond the reach

of any probe. Especially in the nature of men there are mute factors that ·ordinarily· do not show, factors that are sometimes unknown even to the person concerned, but are aroused and displayed by events. If my prudence wasn't able to penetrate through to them and predict them, I bear it no grudge; there are limits to its responsibilities. It is the outcome that defeats me, and ^[B] if it favours the course I rejected, that cannot be helped. I don't turn on myself; I blame my luck, not the way I am built. That is not to be called repentance.

Phocion had given the Athenians a certain piece of advice that was not followed. When however the affair turned out prosperously, against his opinion, someone said to him 'Well, Phocion, are you pleased that the thing is going so well?' 'Of course,' he said, 'I am happy that it has turned out this way, but I do not repent of having given the advice that I did.'

When my friends come to me for advice, I give it freely and clearly, without hesitating—as nearly everyone does—because the matter is chancy and may turn out differently from how I think it will, giving them (·they will think·) cause to reproach me for my advice. That never bothers me, for they will be wrong; and I ought not to have refused them this service.

^[C] I hardly ever have occasion to blame my failures or misfortunes on anyone but myself. For the fact is that I rarely *ask* for anyone's for advice except politely, as a compliment. I seriously ask for advice only when I need learned instruction or knowledge of the facts. But in matters where only my judgement is involved, the reasons of others may support me but will do little to change my direction. I •listen graciously and courteously to *all* of them, but as far as I can recall I have never, up to this moment, •trusted any but my own. In my view they are nothing but flies and atoms that distract my will. I set little store by my own

opinions but just as little by other people's. And fortune has treated me worthily. If I receive little advice, I give even less. [This seems to clash with the preceding paragraph. Note that this one is ^[C]-headed.] I am very rarely asked for it; I am even less believed, and I know of no public or private undertaking that was put on its feet and brought along through my advice. Even those whom fortune has made somewhat dependent on my opinions let themselves be swayed by some quite other mind. I prefer it that way, because I am as protective of my right to peace and quiet as of my right to authority. By leaving me alone they treat me in accordance with my own professed principle, which is to be wholly established and contained within myself; it is a pleasure for me to be detached from others' affairs and free of responsibility for them.

^[B] I have few regrets for any affairs, no matter how they turned out, once they are past. I am always soothed by the thought that they had to happen that way; there they are in the great march of the universe and in the chain of Stoical causes. Your fancy, by wish and imagination, cannot change a single point without overturning the whole order of nature, both past and future.

For the rest, I loathe the superficial repentance that age brings. The ancient who said he was obliged to the years for freeing him from sensual pleasures had a different opinion from mine; I could never be grateful to infirmity for any good it might do me. ^[C] 'Providence will never be found so hostile to its own work as to rank debility among the best of things' [Quintilian]. ^[B] Our appetites [here meaning 'Our attacks of appetite'] are few when we are old; and afterwards a profound satiety siezes us. I see nothing of conscience in that; sourness and weakness imprint on us a lax and rheumatic 'virtue'. We should not allow ourselves to be so borne away by natural decline that our judgement about it is spoiled. In former

days youth and pleasure did not make me fail to recognise the face of vice within the sensuality; nor does the distaste the years have brought me make me fail to recognise now the face of sensuality within the vice.

I don't have any involvement with sensuality now, but I judge concerning it as though I did. ^[C]When I give my reason a lively and attentive shake, I find that ^[B]it is just the same as in my more licentious years, except perhaps that it has become weaker and worse as it has aged. ^[C]And I find that although my reason refuses to put me in the furnace of such pleasure, out of consideration for the interests of my bodily health, it would not do that—now any more than earlier—for the sake of my spiritual [see Glossary] health. ^[B]Seeing my reason lie quiet, I do not think it any braver for that. My temptations are so crippled and enfeebled that they are not worth opposing. I can dispell them merely by waving my hands. If my reason were confronted *now* by my former lust, I'm afraid it would have less power to resist it than it used to have. ·But· I don't see that of itself it *judges* anything differently from how it judged back then, or that it is freshly enlightened. So if there is any convalescence, it is a harmful convalescence.

^[C]A wretched sort of cure, to owe one's health to illness! It is not for our ill-fortune to do us that service; it is for the good fortune of our judgement. Offences and afflictions don't get me to do anything except curse them. They are meant for folk who are put on the alert only by whipping. My reason runs more freely in prosperity. It is far more distracted and occupied when digesting misfortunes than ·when it is digesting· pleasures. I see much more clearly in fair weather. Health counsels me more cheerfully, and also more usefully, than illness does. I progressed as far as I could towards reform and right-rule when I had health to enjoy. I would be ashamed and resentful if the wretched lot

of my decrepitude were to be preferred above the years when I was healthy, alert, and vigorous, and if men were to esteem me not for *being* what I was but for *ceasing to be* that.

In my opinion, human felicity consists not in dying happily (as Antisthenes said) but in living happily. I have never tried to make a monster by sticking a philosopher's tail onto the head and trunk of a dissipated man, or to make this wretched end of my life disavow and belie the longer part of it that was finer and more wholesome. I want to present myself, and to be seen, as uniform throughout. If I were to have a life over again, I would live as I have done; I do not regret the past or fear the future. And unless I deceive myself, it has gone pretty much the same way within me as without. One of my greatest obligations to my fortune is that my bodily state has run its course with each thing in due season. I have seen the buds, the blossom, and the fruit; and now I see them dried up—happily so, because naturally so. I more easily bear the ills that I have, since they come at the proper time, and also because they make me recall more pleasantly the long happiness of my former life.

My wisdom may well have the same stature now as in earlier years; but it was much more powerful and graceful back when it was green, gay and natural than it is now, bent double, querulous and slow.

So I renounce those superficial 'reformations' based on the pains of old age. ^[B]God must touch our hearts. Our conscience must amend itself unaided, through the strengthening of our reason and not through the weakening of our appetites. . . . We should love temperance for its own sake and out of respect for God, who has commanded it to us; and chastity too. What our breathing difficulties lend to us, and what I am indebted to my colic [see Glossary] for, is neither chastity nor temperance.

No-one can pride himself on despising and fighting sen-

sual pleasure if he does not see it, does not know either •its grace and power or •its most alluring beauty. I know them both; and I am the one to say so. But it seems to me that in old age our souls are subject to ills and imperfections that are more troublesome than those of youth. I said this when I was young, and was taunted over my beardless chin. And I still say so now that my grey hair lends me credit. We call 'wisdom' the moroseness of our moods, our distaste for things as they are now. But in truth we do not so much give up our vices as change them—for the worse, in my opinion. In addition to silly decrepit pride, tedious babble, prickly and unsociable moods, superstition and a ridiculous concern for wealth when we have lost the use of it, I find in old age more envy, unfairness and malice. Old age puts more wrinkles on our minds than on our faces. And there are no souls—or very few—which as they grow old do not come to smell sour and musty. It is the man as a whole that marches ·up· towards his flower and ·down· towards his fading.

[C] Seeing the wisdom of Socrates and several of the circumstances of his condemnation, I would venture to think that he deliberately lent himself to it to some extent, by prevarication; because at 70 years of age he would soon have to suffer the benumbing of the rich activity of his mind, and the dimming of its accustomed brightness.

[B] What transformations do I daily see produced by old age in many of my acquaintances! It is a powerful malady—one that flows on naturally and imperceptibly. A great store of study and great foresight are needed to avoid the imperfections it loads on us—or at least to slow their progress. I sense that despite all my defensive works it is gaining on me foot by foot. I put up such resistance as I can. But I do not know where it will take me in the end. Anyway, I am glad to have people know what I shall have declined from.

3. Three kinds of association

[B] We should not nail ourselves down so firmly to our humours and dispositions. Our principal talent is the ability to apply ourselves to a variety of activities. To keep ourselves bound by the bonds of necessity to a single course of action—that is *existing*, not *living*. The fairest souls are those that have the most variety and flexibility. [C] Here is a testimony that honours the elder Cato : 'His mind was so versatile, so ready for anything, that whatever he did you would say he was born for that alone' [Livy].

[B] If it were up to me to train myself in my own fashion, there is no way so good that I would want to be fixed in it and unable to break loose. Life is an uneven, irregular movement with a multitude of forms. Incessantly following yourself, so caught in your inclinations that you cannot depart from them or re-shape them—that is not being a friend of yourself, let alone a master ·of yourself·; it is to be a slave. I am saying this now because I cannot easily escape the bullying of my soul, which usually can't spend time on anything without getting bogged down in it, or apply itself to anything except fully and intensely. However trivial the subject it is given, my soul enlarges and stretches it to the point where it needs its whole strength to work on it. For this reason, its idleness is painful for me and damages my health. Most minds need extraneous matter to arouse and exercise them; mine needs rather to rest and settle down. . . . Its principal and most difficult study is the study of itself.

[C] For it, books are the sort of occupation that seduces it from its study. [B] At the first thoughts that occur to it, it stirs about and shows signs of vigour in all directions, practises its touch, now for order, now for order and grace, [C] organises, moderates and fortifies itself. [B] It has what it needs to awaken its faculties by itself. Nature has given to it,

as to all minds, enough material of its own for its use, and enough subjects of its own in which to make discoveries and arrive at judgements.

[C] For anyone who knows how to probe himself and to do so vigorously, reflection is a powerful and full study: I would rather shape my soul than furnish it. No occupation is stronger than entertaining one's own thoughts—or weaker, depending on what kind of soul it is. The greatest of souls make it their vocation, 'to whom living is thinking' [Cicero]. Nature has granted to thinking the prerogative that there is nothing else we can keep up for as long, no activity we engage in more commonly or more easily. It is the occupation of the gods, says Aristotle, from which springs their happiness and ours.

Reading particularly serves to arouse my reason by presenting a variety of topics that provide work not for my memory but for my judgement.

[B] Thus, few conversations hold my interest unless they are vigorous and powerful. It is true that grace and beauty satisfy and occupy as much as weight and depth, or even more. And since I grow sleepy during any other sort of conversation, lending it only the outer skin of my attention, it often happens that in such feeble and abject sort of talk, small talk, I say stupid things unworthy of a child, or make silly, ridiculous answers, or remain stubbornly silent, which is even more awkward and rude. I have a dreamy way of withdrawing into myself, as well as a dull and childish ignorance of many everyday matters. Those two qualities have brought me the distinction that five or six true anecdotes can be told about me as absurd as about any man whatsoever.

1. ·ASSOCIATION WITH MEN·

Now, to continue with my subject: this hard-to-please dispo-

sition makes me fastidious in dealings with men—I need to handpick my companions—and also makes me ill-fitted for ordinary activities. We live and deal with the common people; if association with them is a burden to us, if we disdain to adjust ourselves to humble and vulgar souls

—and the humble, vulgar ones are often as well-governed as the most refined [C] (all wisdom that does not adapt to the common flatness is itself flat)—

[B] then we should no longer deal with our own affairs or with anyone else's; both public and personal business involves us with these people.

The most beautiful ways of our soul are the least strained and most natural ones; the best occupations are the least forced. Lord, what a favour wisdom does for those whose desires it adjusts to their powers! No knowledge is more useful. 'According as you can' was the refrain and favourite saying of Socrates, a saying of great substance. We should direct our desires to, and settle them on, the easiest and nearest things. Is it not a stupid humour of mine to be out of tune with the hundreds of men to whom I am joined by fortune, whom I cannot manage without, in order to cling to one or two who are out of my reach, or rather to a mad desire for something I cannot get?

My mild *mœurs*, opposed to all sharpness and contentiousness, may very well have freed me from the burden of envy and hostility; no man ever gave more occasion (I do not say to be loved, but) not to be hated. But the coolness of my dealings has rightly robbed me of the good-will of many, who can be excused for interpreting it in a different and worse sense.

I am very capable of forming and maintaining exceptional and exquisite friendships. I grasp so hungrily at any acquaintanceship that suits my taste; I put myself forward and throw myself into them so eagerly that I hardly fail to attach

myself and to make an impression wherever I land. I have often made happy proof of this. In ordinary friendships I am rather barren and cool, for my pace is not natural if it is not under full sail. Besides, my fortune, having trained me from my youth for a single perfect friendship and given me a taste for it, has in truth given me a distaste for other friendships and imprinted too deeply on my fancy that—as Plutarch said—friendship is an animal made for company, not for the herd. I also, by nature, find it hard to impart myself by halves, with limitations and with that servile and suspicious prudence prescribed to us in these numerous imperfect friendships—prescribed especially in our times when one cannot *safely* talk about the world, unless one speaks falsely.

Yet I see clearly that anyone who aims as I do at the comforts of life (I mean the essential comforts) should shun like the plague these fastidious and squeamish attitudes. I would praise a soul with different levels, one that could be tense *and* could relax; a soul at ease wherever fortune led it; which could chat with a neighbour about his building, his hunting and his lawsuit, and enjoy conversing with a carpenter or a gardener. I envy those who can be familiar with the humblest of their retinue and carry on a conversation with their own servants.

[C] I do not like Plato's advice always to talk like a master to our domestics, male or female, without jests or intimacy. For, in addition to the reason I have just given, it is unkind and unjust to make so much of this trivial privilege of fortune; the administrations that admit the least inequality between servants and masters seem to me the most equitable.

[B] Others study themselves in order to hoist their minds and make them glitter; I do so in order to humble mine and lay it to rest. There's nothing wrong with this except when it is overdone. Horace wrote:

You sing of Aeacus' line

and the wars beneath the sacred walls of Ilium.

But concerning how much a jar of Chian wine

will cost me, who will heat my water,

where I shall find shelter, and when

I shall escape the Pelignian cold, you say nothing.

Thus, just as Spartan valour needed moderating by the gentle gracious playing of flutes to calm it down in war lest it fling itself into recklessness and fury (whereas all other nations ordinarily use shrill and powerful sounds and voices to stir and inflame the hearts of their soldiers), so also it seems to me, contrary to the usual opinion, that in exercising our minds we mostly have more need of lead than of wings, of coolness and rest rather than of ardour and agitation. Above all, it is in my opinion acting like a fool to come across as knowledgeable, talking always punctiliously and formally, in the company of people who are not knowledgeable. You should come down to the level of those you are with, sometimes even affecting ignorance. Set aside force and subtlety; with ordinary folk it is enough if you maintain due order. Apart from that, if they want you to creep along at ground-level, do it.

Learned men are very apt to stumble over this stone. They are always parading their mastery of their subject, scattering their book-learning on all sides. These days they have *sung* it so loudly into the boudoirs and the ears of the ladies that even if the ladies retain none of the substance, they behave as though they have; on every sort of topic and theme, they speak and write in a newfangled and erudite manner:

'This is the style in which they express their fears, their anger, their joy and their cares. This is the style

in which they pour forth all their secrets; what else?

They copulate learnedly.' [Juvenal]

They cite Plato and St Thomas Aquinas for things that the first passer-by would support just as well. The learning that could not reach their souls has stayed on their tongues.

If well-born ladies will take my advice, they will be content to display the natural riches that are really theirs. They hide and drape their own beauties under borrowed ones. It is very simple-minded to dull one's own brightness so as to shine with borrowed light; they are buried, entombed, under artifice. . . . It's because they do not know themselves enough; the world has nothing more beautiful; it is for them to lend honour to the arts and

the end of the sentence: *de farder le fard.*

literally meaning: to put make-up on make-up.

best understood as: [you decide]

What should they be doing except living beloved and honoured? They possess and know only too much for that. They need only to arouse a little and warm up the abilities that they have. When I see them intent on rhetoric, law, logic and such-like vain trinkets that have no relation to their needs, I begin to fear that the men who advise them to do this are merely having a pretext for manipulating them. For what other excuse could I find for them? It suffices that without our help they can •adjust the grace of their eyes to gaiety, to severity, and to gentleness; •season a refusal with harshness, or uncertainty, or encouragement; and •not try to *interpret* the speeches we make in courting them. With this knowledge they have the whip-hand and master the schoolmasters and the school.

If however it vexes them to lag behind us in anything whatever, and if out of curiosity they want a share in books, then **poetry** is a pastime suited to their needs, an art that is

- wanton,
- subtle,
- in fancy dress,
- wordy,
- all pleasure,
- all show,

like them! They will also get various benefits from **history**. From the part of **philosophy** that is useful for life they will take arguments that train them to •judge concerning our moods and characters, to •defend themselves against our treacheries, to •control the rashness of their own desires, to •cultivate their freedom, to •prolong the pleasures of life, and to •bear with human dignity the unreliability of a servant, the rudeness of a husband, and the attack of years and of wrinkles; and things like that. That is the most that I would assign to them in the matter of learning.

There are private, retiring and inward natures. My essential pattern is suited to imparting things and putting them forth; I am all in the open, in full view; I was born for company and friendship. The solitude that I like and advocate is primarily nothing but bringing my feelings and thoughts back to myself, restraining and shortening (not my steps but) my desires and my cares, abandoning solicitude for external things and fleeing like death from all servitude and obligation, ^[C]and running away not so much from the press of people as from the press of affairs.

^[B]To tell the truth, solitude of place makes me reach out and extend myself more: I throw myself into matters of state and into the whole universe more willingly when I am alone. At the Louvre and in a crowd I withdraw into my skin; crowds drive me back into myself, and my thoughts are never more full of folly, more licentious and private than in crowded places dedicated to circumspection and formal prudence. Our follies don't make me laugh; our wisdom does.

I don't have a built-in hostility to the bustle of courts; I have spent part of my life there, and am so made that I can get along cheerfully in large groups, provided that it is at intervals and at times of my own choosing. But the laxness of judgement that I am speaking of forces me to bind myself to solitude; even in my own home, indeed, in the midst of a crowded household which is among the most visited. I meet plenty of people there, but rarely those I like to talk with; and I reserve an unusual degree of freedom there for myself and for others. There we have called a truce with all etiquette, welcomings and escortings and other such troublesome practices decreed by formal courtesy. (Oh what servile and bothersome customs!) Everybody goes his own way; anyone who wants to can think his own thoughts; I remain dumb, abstracted and inward-looking, without offending my guests.

The men whose companionship and intimacy I seek are talented ones of the sort that are called honest men [see Glossary]. Having the picture of them in mind spoils my taste for any others. It is, if you take it rightly, the rarest human type, and a type that is mainly owed to nature. The aim of such association is simply intimacy, fellowship and conversation—exercising the soul with no other gain. In our talks, any topic will do; I do not worry if it lacks depth or weight; charm and appropriateness are always there; everything in the conversation is imbued with mature and constant good sense, and mingled with kindness, frankness, gaiety and friendship. Our minds show their beauty and strength not merely on the subject of property-law or the affairs of kings, but also in conversations about private matters. I recognize my men even by their silences or their smiles; and I may learn more about them at table than in the council chamber. Hippomachus used to say that he could tell good wrestlers by seeing them walk down the street.

If Learning wants to enter our conversation, she will not be rejected; she will not be (as she usually is) professorial, imperious and bullying, but subordinate and herself willing to learn. We merely want to pass the time; when it's time to be instructed and preached at, we will go to find her on her throne. Let her come down to us on this occasion, if she pleases. For, useful and desirable as she is, I presume that if we had to we could quite well dispense with her and do our business without her. A soul that is well-born and practised in dealing with men makes itself thoroughly agreeable by itself [i.e. without help from learning]. Art is nothing but the list and record of the productions of such souls.

2. ·ASSOCIATION WITH WOMEN·

There is for me another delightful kind of converse: that with beautiful and honest women. . . . If the soul has less to enjoy here than in the first ·kind of association·, our bodily senses, which play a greater part in this one, bring it to a proportion close to the other—though in my opinion not equal to it. But it is an association in which we should be a little on our guard, especially men like me over whom the body has a lot of power. I was scalded by this in my youth, and suffered all the ragings the poets say come to men who go after women without restraint and without judgement. It is true that that whiplash has subsequently been a lesson to me: 'Anyone in the Grecian fleet who escaped from that shipwreck on the promontory of Caphareus ever thereafter turns his sails away from the waters of Euboea' [Ovid]. It is madness to fix all our thoughts on it and to engage in it with a furious and reckless passion. But on the other hand,

to get involved in it without love and without committing one's will, like an actor playing the standard role of our age and customs, contributing nothing of one's own but *words*,

is indeed providing for one's safety; but in a cowardly fashion, like someone whose fear of danger led him to jettison his honour, his goods, or his pleasure. For it is certain that those who form such a relationship cannot expect to get from it anything that will please or satisfy a noble soul. We must truly have desired what we truly want to enjoy possessing; I say this even though fortune may unjustly favour role-playing—as often happens, since there is not one woman, no matter how ugly she may be, who does not think herself lovable

^[C] and who does not think herself attractive for her youth, her laugh, her way of moving; for no woman is comprehensively ugly, any more than any is comprehensively beautiful. Brahman girls who have nothing else to recommend them go to the market-place where people have been assembled, to display their organs of matrimony to see whether in this respect at least they are worth marrying.

^[B] It follows that there is not one who doesn't let herself be easily persuaded by the first oath of devotion sworn to her. Now, the inevitable outcome of this common and ordinary treachery of men nowadays is what experience already shows us: to escape us, women—to put this in terms of battlefield metaphors—to rally and fall back on themselves or on other women or else they fall in line with the example we give them, playing their part in the farce and joining in the business without passion, concern, or love. ^[C] 'Unsusceptible to passions, their own or anyone else's' [Tacitus]. Following the conviction of Lysias in Plato, they reckon that the *less* we love them the *more* usefully and agreeably they can devote themselves to us. ^[B] It will go as in the theatre: the audience will enjoy it as least as much as the actors do.

For my part, I no more recognise Venus without Cupid than maternity without children; they are things whose

essences are necessary to each other. So this cheating splashes back on the man who does it. It costs him hardly anything, but he gets nothing worthwhile out of it either. Those who made Venus a goddess regarded her principal beauty as incorporeal and spiritual [see Glossary]; yet the 'beauty' pursued by the men I'm talking about is not even human—not even *animal*. The beasts do not desire it in such a gross and earth-bound form. We see that imagination and desire often set beasts on heat and arouse them before their body does; we see that beasts of both sexes choose and *select* the object of their desires from among the herd, and that they maintain long-term affectionate relationships. Even ones that are denied bodily vigour by old age still tremble, whinny and quiver with love. We see them, before the act, full of hope and fire, and when the body has played its part still tickling themselves with the sweet memory of it. We see some who swell with pride as they leave the scene, and produce songs of joy and triumph—tired and sated. Anyone who merely wants to relieve his body of a natural necessity has no reason to trouble others with such elaborate preparations; those are not food for a gross and coarse hunger.

I do not ask to be thought better than I am; but I will say this about the errors of my youth. I hardly ever engaged in venal commerce with prostitutes, not only because of the danger ^[C] to my health (though even then I did not manage to escape a couple of light anticipatory doses) ^[B] but also because I despised it. I wanted to sharpen the pleasure by the difficulty, by the desire, and by a kind of glory; I liked •the style of the Emperor Tiberius, who in his love-affairs was drawn more by modesty and rank than by any other quality, and •the attitude of the courtesan Flora, who delighted in the dignity of her lovers who were never less than a dictator, a consul or a censor. Pearls and brocade certainly add to the pleasure; so do titles and retinue. Moreover, I used to

set a high value on **a** the mind, provided however that **b** the body was not deficient; for if one of the two beauties had to be lacking, I must admit in all conscience that I would have chosen to do without **a** the spiritual [see Glossary] one; it has its use in better things. But where love is concerned—a matter mainly connected with sight and touch—one can achieve something without **a** the mental graces but nothing without **b** the bodily ones.

Beauty is the true advantage of the ladies.

[C] It is so much more exclusively *theirs* than ours is *ours*. Though ours requires slightly different traits, it is at its best in boyish and beardless youths, when it is indistinguishable from theirs. It is said that at the court of the Grand Seigneur the countless males chosen to serve him because of their beauty are sent away at the age of 22 at the latest.

[B] Reasoning powers, wisdom and the offices of friendship are oftener to be found in men, which is why they govern the affairs of the world.

3. ·ASSOCIATION WITH BOOKS·

Those two forms of converse are chancy and dependent on other people. **(1)** is distressingly rare; **(2)** withers with age; so they would not have provided adequately for the needs of my life. Converse with books (which is my third form) is more reliable and more properly our own. It concedes other advantages to the first two, but has its own advantage of being constantly and easily available with its services. It is at my side throughout my life's course, accompanying me everywhere. It consoles me in old age and in solitude. It spares me the burden of tedious idleness and at any time releases me from disagreeable company. It dulls the pangs of sorrow, if the sorrow is not extreme and overpowering. To distract me from a troubling thought, I need only to resort

to books; they easily rid me of the thought by diverting me to *them*. And yet they do not rebel when they see that I seek them out only for lack of other benefits that are more real, lively and natural; they always welcome me with the same expression.

He may well go on foot, they say, who leads his horse by the bridle! And our James, king of Naples and Sicily, young, handsome and healthy, had himself carried about the land on a stretcher, lying on a wretched feather-pillow, dressed in a robe of grey cloth with a cap to match, followed meanwhile by great regal pomp with all sorts of litters and hand-led horses, and by officers and noblemen; in this performance he displayed an austerity that was still weak and wavering: 'No need to pity an invalid who has a remedy up his coat-sleeve!' Everything I get from books consists in experiencing and applying that proverb (which is a very true one). Actually, I hardly use them more than those who have no contact with them. I enjoy them as misers do riches, through knowing that I shall enjoy them whenever I please; my soul takes its fill of contentment from this right of possession.

I do not travel without books, in peace or in war. Yet many days will pass, and even some months, without my using them. I'll do it soon, I say, or tomorrow, or when I feel like it. The time speeds by and is gone, but this does me no harm; for it is impossible to describe what comfort and peace I derive from the thought that my books are at my side to give me pleasure whenever I want it, and from recognising how much support they bring to my life. It is the best provision I have found for this human journey, and I am extremely sorry for men of understanding who do not have it. I will accept any other sort of pastime, no matter how trifling, because this one cannot fail me.

At home I slip off a little more often to my library, where at one sweep I command a view of my household. I am above

the entrance, and see below me my garden, my chicken-run, my courtyard, and see into most parts of my house. There I can leaf through now one book, now another, without order or design, in disconnected fragments. Sometimes my mind wanders off, at others I walk to and fro, dictating fancies of mine such as this one ·that you are now reading·.

[C] My library is on the third floor of a tower. The first is my chapel; the second, a bedroom and dressing-room, where I often sleep so as to be alone. Above ·the library· there is a large *garderobe*. [A *garderobe* could be a wardrobe or a room containing a privy. It is not clear which Montaigne means. What follows makes best sense if it all refers to the library, though what Montaigne says about the amount of time he spends there does not square well with his earlier saying that he goes there ‘a little more often’.] It was formerly the most useless place in my house; I now spend most days of my life there, and most hours of each day. I am never there at night. Adjoining it is a rather elegant little room in which a fire can be lit in winter, very pleasantly lighted by a window. I could easily add onto each side a gallery a hundred paces long and twelve wide, having found that the walls have for other purposes been raised to the required height. (What deters me from doing this is not so much the expense as the trouble—which is what drives me from all business!) Every place of retreat needs a place to walk. My thoughts doze off if I let them sit down. My mind will not budge if my legs don’t move it. Those who study without books are all in that situation.

My library is round in shape, squared off only for the needs of my table and chair; as it curves around it offers me at a glance every one of my books ranged on five shelves all the way round. It has three splendid and unhampered views, and a free space sixteen paces in diameter.

I am less continuously there in winter since my house is perched on a little hill, as its name indicates, and contains

no room more exposed to the wind than this one, which I like for being a little hard to reach and out of the way—for the sake of the exercise and because it keeps the crowd away. There I have my seat. I try to make my dominion over it absolutely pure, and to withdraw this one corner from society, whether filial, conjugal or civil. Everywhere else I have only a verbal authority, one essentially mixed. Wretched the man, to my mind, who has nowhere in his house where he can be by himself, pay court to himself in private and hide away! Ambition pays its servants well by keeping them always on display like the statue in a market place: ‘Great fortune is great slavery’ [Seneca]. They cannot even find privacy on their privy!

Of the austerities of life that our monks delight in I have never considered any to be harsher than the rule I have noted in some of their orders: to be perpetually *with* somebody, and to be surrounded by people no matter what they are doing. I find it somewhat more tolerable to be always alone than never to be able to be so.

[B] If anyone tells me that it is degrading the muses to use them as a mere plaything and pastime, he does not know as I do the value of pleasure, play, and pastime. I would almost say that any other aim is ridiculous. I live from day to day, and—forgive me!—I live only for myself; my plans stop there.

In youth I studied in order to show off; later, a little, to make myself wiser; now for recreation; never for gain. As for the silly spendthrift fancy I once had for furnishing myself with books, [C] not just to meet my needs but three steps beyond that, namely [B] to decorate my walls with them, I gave that up long ago.

Books have many charming qualities for those who know how to select them; but there is no good without ill. The pleasure we take in them is no more pure and untarnished than any other. Reading has its disadvantages—and they are

weighty ones: it exercises the soul, but the body (my care for which I have not forgotten) meanwhile remains inactive and droops and saddens. I know of no excess more harmful to me, or more to be avoided in my declining years.

There you have my three favourite particular occupations. I make no mention of the ones I owe to the world through my obligations to the state.

4. Diversion

[B] Once I was charged with consoling a lady who was feeling distress—

genuine distress; most of their mourning is artificial and ritualistic: ‘She has a reserve of abundant tears ever ready to flow, ever awaiting her decision to make them do so’ [Juvenal].

To oppose this passion is the wrong way to proceed, for opposition goads the women on and drives them further into sadness; one makes the trouble worse by the abrasiveness of argument. (We see in commonplace discussions that if anyone challenges some casual statement of mine, I stiffly defend it—more so if it is a matter of concern to me.)

And then, by acting that way you set about your cure in a rough manner, whereas the first greetings a doctor makes to his patient should be cheerful, pleasing, and full of grace: nothing was ever achieved by an ugly churlish doctor. So from the outset you should *encourage* women’s grief, showing some signs of approving it and excusing it. This will earn you the trust needed to proceed further; then you can glide down an easy and imperceptible slope to arguments that are more solid and appropriate for curing them.

Since my main desire was to deceive the bystanders who all kept their eyes on me, I decided to plaster over the cracks.

Anyway, I find by experience that I am a heavy-handed and unsuccessful persuader. I present my arguments either too pointedly and drily, or too brusquely, or too carelessly. After I had sympathised with this lady’s anguish for a while, I made no attempt to cure it by powerful vigorous arguments, either because I had none or because I thought I could achieve my effect better by another way.

[C] Nor did I set about choosing among the various methods that philosophy prescribes for consoling grief, saying that what we are lamenting is not an evil (e.g. Cleanthes); that it is a light one (the Aristotelians); that lamenting is an action that is neither just nor laudable (Chrysippus); that we should shift our mind away from painful thoughts to pleasant ones (Epicurus, closer to my style). Nor did I, like Cicero, arm myself with this whole pile of cures, dispensing them as required.

[B] Rather, by gently deflecting our talk and gradually leading it on to nearby subjects and then on to slightly more remote ones as she gave me more of her attention, I imperceptibly stole this painful thought from her; and as long as I remained with her, I kept her composed and totally calm. I made use of a diversion. Those who came to help her after me found no improvement in her, since I had not laid the axe to the roots.

[C] I have doubtless touched elsewhere on the kind of diversion used in politics [Essay 23 in Book 2]. And the practice of military diversions—such as those used by Pericles in the Peloponnesian Wars and by hundreds of others elsewhere to draw out enemy forces from their lands—is all too common in the histories.

[B] It was an ingenious shift by which the sieur de Humbercourt saved himself and others in the town of Liège, which the Duke of Burgundy, who was besieging it, had obliged

him to enter so as to draw up agreed terms of surrender. The townspeople assembled by night for this purpose broke into mutiny against what had been agreed; and several decided to fall on the negotiators whom they had in their power. Hearing the rumble of the first wave of these people who were coming to break into his apartments, he at once dispatched two of the inhabitants—there were several with him—bearing new and milder conditions to put before their council; he had made them up on the spot, for his need. These two stopped the first tempest, bringing the excited mob to the town hall to hear the terms they were charged with, and to deliberate on them. The deliberation was brief; and behold a second storm is unleashed, as animated as the first; and he dispatches to meet them four new mediators similar to the first two, protesting that this time they are carrying much more tempting conditions that will entirely please and satisfy them, thus driving these people back to their conclave. In short, by wasting their time that way, diverting their frenzy and dissipating it in empty discussions, he eventually put it to sleep until daybreak—which had been his main concern.

This other story is in the same category. Atalanta, a girl of outstanding beauty and wonderful agility, sought to rid herself of a throng of a thousand suitors seeking to wed her. She decreed that she would accept the one who matched her in running, with the proviso that those who failed should lose their lives. There were found plenty who reckoned the prize worth such a risk and who incurred the penalty of that cruel bargain.

Hippomenes' turn to make his attempt came after the others; he asked for help from the goddess who protects all amorous passion. She answered his prayer by providing him with three golden apples and a plan for how to use them. As the race was being run, when Hippomenes felt his lady pressing hard on his heels he dropped one of the apples as

though inadvertently. The girl, arrested by its beauty, did not fail to turn aside to pick it up. 'The startled girl, eager to have the shining apple, turns from the race and picks up the rolling gold' [Ovid]. At the right moments he did the same with the second and the third apples, finally winning the race because of those distractions and diversions.

When the doctors cannot purge a catarrh, they divert it and lead it off to another less dangerous part. I have noticed that this is also the most usual prescription for ailments of the soul.

[C] 'The mind should sometimes be deflected to other interests, preoccupations, cares, business; and finally it is often cured—like the physically sick when slow to recover—by a change of place.' [Cicero]

[B] The soul can rarely be made to meet its troubles head on. Rather than withstanding their attack or beating it off, it is caused to avoid and sidestep them.

The next example is too high and too difficult. It is only for first-class men to dwell purely on the thing itself, reflect on it, judge it. It is only for Socrates to meet death with a normal countenance, to become familiar with it and play with it. He seeks no consolation outside the thing itself; dying seems to him a natural and indifferent [here = 'neither good nor bad'] event. He fixes his gaze precisely on it and resolves to accept it, without looking away.

The disciples of Hegesias, who starve themselves to death, inflamed by the fine arguments in his lectures—[C] doing this in such numbers that King Ptolemy forbade Hegesias to go on maintaining these murderous doctrines in his school—[B] are not focussed on dying itself; they are not judging it. It is not *there* that they fix their thoughts; the goal to which they run is a new existence.

Those poor wretches to be seen on the scaffold, filled with burning devotion. . . ., their ears intent on the instructions

they are being given, their eyes and hands lifted up to heaven, their voices raised in loud prayer full of fierce and sustained emotion—are certainly behaving in a way that is praiseworthy and suitable to such an extremity. They should be praised for piety but not, strictly speaking, for constancy. They flee the struggle; they turn their thoughts away from death, just as we occupy our children's attention when they are being lanced. . . . Those who have to cross over some terrifyingly deep abyss are ordered to close their eyes or turn them away.

[C] On Nero's orders Subrius Flavius was condemned to be put to death at the hands of Niger. Both were military commanders. When he was led to the place of execution, he saw that the grave Niger had ordered to be dug for him was uneven and shoddily made. Turning to the soldiers who were present, he said 'You could not do even this according to your military training!' And when Niger urged him to hold his head firm, he retorted 'If only you could strike as firmly!' And he guessed right: Niger, his arm trembling, needed several blows to cut his head off. That man certainly seems to have had his thoughts directly fixed on the object.

[B] The man who dies in the melee, weapons in hand, is not at that time thinking about death; he neither feels it nor considers it; he is carried away by the heat of battle. A gentleman whom I know was struck to the ground in battle; while he was down, he felt his enemy stab him nine or ten times with a dagger, while everyone present was calling him to think of his conscience [here = 'to reconcile himself to approaching death']. He told me later that although these voices reached his ears, they did not touch him in the least, and that his only thought was of struggling loose and avenging himself. He killed his man in that same combat.

[C] The man who brought Lucius Silanus his death sentence did him a great service; having heard Silanus reply

that he was prepared to die but not at such wicked hands, the man rushed at him with his soldiers to take him by force, while he, unarmed, stoutly defended himself with fists and feet. He was killed in the struggle. By his quick and stormy anger he destroyed the painful thought of the lingering and elaborate death to which he was destined.

[B] Our thoughts are always *elsewhere*. The hope of a better life stays and supports us; or the hope of our children's worth, or the future glory of our name, or an escape from the evils of this life, or the vengeance menacing those who are causing our death. 'I hope that if the holy gods can prevail, you will drink the cup of my vengeance, driven on the rocks in the midst of the sea, constantly crying out the name of Dido. I shall hear it, and its fame will reach me in the deepest underworld.' [Virgil]

[C] Crowned with a garland, Xenophon was performing his sacrificial rites when he was told of the death of Gryllus his son in the battle of Mantinea. His first reaction to this news was to throw down his garland; but then, when he heard how valiantly his son had died, he picked it up from the ground and placed it back on his head.

[B] Even Epicurus, when he was dying, found consolation in the eternity and moral usefulness of his writings: [C] 'All labours are bearable that bring fame and glory' [Cicero]. And the same wound, the same hardship, do not—says Xenophon—weigh as heavily on a general as on a common soldier. Epaminondas accepted death much more cheerfully after being told that his side was victorious. [B] Other similar circumstances can occupy, divert and distract us from considering the thing in itself.

[C] Indeed, the arguments of philosophy are constantly skirting the matter and dodging it, scarcely grazing its outer surface. The great Zeno, the leading figure in the leading school of philosophy that dominates all the others, says this

against death: 'No evil is honourable; death is honourable; therefore death is no evil'; and he says against drunkenness, 'No-one confides his secrets to a drunkard; each man trusts the wise man: therefore the wise man will not be a drunkard.' Is that hitting the bull's-eye? I delight in seeing those first-rate minds unable to shake off our common lot. Perfect men though they may be, they are still grossly *men*.

[B] The desire for vengeance is a sweet passion deeply ingrained in us by our nature; I can see this clearly, though I have never experienced it. To draw a young prince away from it recently, I did not tell him that when anyone strikes you on one cheek you should, as a work of charity, turn the other; nor did I represent to him the tragic outcomes that poetry attributes to that passion. I left vengeance aside and spent my time making him savour the beauty of a contrary picture: the honour, acclaim and good will he would acquire by clemency and kindness. I diverted him towards ambition. That is how things get done.

If when in love your passion is too powerful, disperse it, they say; and they say truly, for I have often tried this with good results. Break it down into a variety of desires, one of which may rule as master if you like, but for fear that it may dominate you and tyrannise over you, weaken it, check it, by subdividing it and diverting it.

'When the capricious vein throbs in the restless member' [Persius];

'Ejaculate the gathered fluid into anything at all' [Lucretius];

And get onto it early, lest you find yourself in trouble once it has seized hold of you. . . .

Once I was touched by a grief that my nature made powerful, and it was even more justified than it was powerful.

I might well have died from it if I had simply relied on my own powers. Needing some urgent diversion to distract me from it, I used skill and effort to make myself fall in love, helped in that by my youth. Love comforted me and took me away from affliction brought on by friendship [see Glossary].¹ The same applies everywhere: some painful idea gets hold of me; I find it quicker to change it than to subdue it; I replace it by one that is contrary, or at least different. Variation always solaces, dissolves and dissipates. If I cannot fight it, I escape it; and in fleeing I dodge, I use tricks; by changing place, occupation and company, I escape into the throng of other pastimes and thoughts, where it loses track of me.

That is nature's way in granting us the benefit of inconstancy; for time, which nature has given us as the sovereign physician of our passions, achieves its effects primarily by providing our imagination with other concerns, so dissolving and breaking up that first sensation, however strong it may be. A wise man sees his dying friend scarcely less clearly after 25 years than after the first year, [C] and according to Epicurus not a bit less, for he attributed no lessening of our sufferings either to our anticipating them or to their growing old. [B] But so many other thoughts cut across the first one that in the end it grows tired and weary.

To change the direction of current gossip, Alcibiades cut off the ears and tail of his handsome dog and drove it into the public square, so that the people, given this subject to chatter about, would leave his other activities in peace. I have also known women too who have hidden their true affections under pretended ones, in order to divert people's opinions and conjectures and to mislead the gossips. But I knew one who got well and truly caught: she abandoned her original passion for the pretended one. From her case I

¹ [Montaigne's close friend Étienne de la Boétie died about 25 years before this essay was written. See next paragraph.]

learned that those who are well lodged ·in a woman's favour· are fools to consent to such mummery. Since overt greetings and conversations are reserved for that decoy of a suitor, be assured that he is not very clever if he does not eventually take your place and give you his. ^[c] That really is cutting out and stitching a shoe for someone else to wear.

^[b] Minor things divert and distract us, for minor things hold us. We scarcely look at things on the whole and on their own; it is the small and superficial circumstances and images that strike us, the empty husks that peel off from things. . . . Even Plutarch mourns his daughter for the monkey tricks of her childhood. We are afflicted by the memory of a farewell, of an action, of some particular grace, of a last blessing. Caesar's robe troubled all of Rome, which his death had not done. The sound of the *names* that ring in our ears—

'My poor Master!',
 'My dear friend!',
 'Alas! my dear father!',
 'My sweet daughter!'

—when these keep hammering in my mind, and I look at them closely, I find that I am being moved by the words and the intonation! Just as preachers' exclamations often move their congregation more than their reasons. . . . While that is happening, I do not weigh or penetrate the true and solid essence of my subject. 'With stimuli such as these, grief provokes itself' [Lucan]. These are the foundations of our mourning.

^[c] The obstinacy of my ·kidney· stones, especially when in the penis, has sometimes forced me into prolonged suppressions of urine during three or four days, and so far forward me into death that it would have been madness to hope or even to wish to avoid it, given the cruelty of the strain this condition entails. . . . Having reached that point, I considered •how *light* were the stimuli and objects that nursed in me

the wish to stay alive, •out of what atoms the weight and difficulty of this departure ·from life· built itself up in my soul, •what frivolous thoughts we make room for in so great an affair—a hound, a horse, a book, a wine-glass and whatnot had their role in my loss. With others it is their ambitious hopes, their purse, or their learning—no less foolishly, in my opinion. I look casually at death when I look on it globally as the end of my life. Taken in that way, I can master it; in detail, it harasses me. The tears of a manservant, the distribution of my clothes, the touch of a familiar hand, a routine word of comfort—any of these makes me disconsolate and sorry for myself.

^[b] Thus the laments in fiction trouble our souls, and the regrets of Dido and Ariadne in Virgil and Catullus impassion even those who do not believe in them. ^[c] It is a sign of a hard and obstinate nature to feel no emotion about them. . . . To experience no emotion from them is to be like Polemon, an example of a hard and inflexible heart, of whom that is told as a miracle that he did not even blench when a mad dog chewed off his calf! ^[b] And no matter how great a man's wisdom, he can never, by his judgment alone, get so close to grasping the cause of an intense grief that he cannot get even closer through *presence*, when the eyes and ears have a share in it. . . .

Is it reasonable that even the arts should exploit and profit from our natural weakness and inborn animal stupidity? The orator, rhetoric says, in the *performance* of his plea, will be moved by the sound of his own voice and by his own feigned indignation; he will let himself be tricked into the passion he is portraying. By means of this mummery that he enacts, he will stamp on himself the essence of true grief and then transmit it to the judges, who are even less involved in the case than he is. It is like those mourners who are hired at funerals to help in the ceremony of mourning,

and sell their tears by weight and measure, and also their sadness; for although they go through borrowed motions, it is nevertheless certain that by habitually adopting the right countenance, they are often entirely carried away and inwardly effected by a genuine melancholy.

With several other of his friends I once had to escort the body of Monsieur de Gramont from La Fère, where he was killed in the siege, to Soissons. I noticed that wherever we passed, we filled the people with tears and lamentations, doing this purely by the solemn pomp of our procession, since they didn't even know the dead man's name.

[C] Quintilian says that he has seen actors so deeply engaged in playing a mournful role that they were still weeping from it after returning home; and of himself he says that, having undertaken ·as an orator· to arouse some passion in others, he espoused it himself to the point of being overcome by tears and with the pallor of face and the bearing of a man really overwhelmed with grief.

[B] In a region near our mountains, the women play. . . . a double role: they magnify their grief for their lost husband by recalling his good and agreeable qualities, while also listing his imperfections, as if to bring themselves into balance and to divert themselves from pity to disdain. [C] In this they are acting with far better grace than we do when we lose a mere acquaintance and pride ourselves on giving him new and undeserved praises, turning him (now that he is lost to sight) into something quite different from what he seemed to us to be when we were seeing him—as if regret were an instructive thing or tears could clarify our understanding by washing it! Here and now, I renounce any flattering eulogies anyone may want to give me not because I shall deserve them but because I shall be dead!

[B] If you ask that man 'How does this siege concern you?' he will reply: 'I am concerned to give an example of routine

obedience to the prince; I do not expect any benefit from it. As for glory, I know how little of that can come to a private individual like me. I have no passion or quarrel in this,' Yet look at him the next day; entirely changed, all boiling and red with anger at his post in the line of attack. This new vigour and hatred have been injected into his veins by the glint of so much steel, the flashes of our cannon and the din of our kettle-drums.

'A trivial cause!' you will tell me. What do you mean, *cause*? None is needed to agitate our soul; it is dominated and agitated by a daydream without body or subject. When I throw myself into building castles in the air, my imagination creates for me there comforts and pleasures by which my soul is really stimulated and rejoiced. How often we encumber our mind with anger or sadness by such shadows, and put ourselves into fantastical passions that impair both soul and body! . . .

[B] Ask yourself where is the object of this change? Are *we* the only things in nature that are sustained and pushed around by inanity? Cambyses dreamed in his sleep that his brother was to become king of Persia; so he had him killed—a beloved brother whom he had always trusted. Aristodemus, king of the Messenians, killed himself because he fancied there was a bad omen in some noise his dogs were making. King Midas did the same, disturbed and worried by an unpleasant dream he had had. Abandoning your life for a dream is to value it for exactly what it is worth.

Yet listen to our soul triumphing over the wretched body, its frailty, its being a target for all kinds of injuries and impairments. Truly it has a fine right to talk about this!

'O wretched clay which Prometheus first moulded! How unwisely he worked! By his art he arranged the body, but did not see the mind; his first concern should have been the soul.' [Propertius]

5. Old age, love, and sex

[Montaigne entitled this Essay 'On some lines of Virgil'. Presumably the lines he had in mind are the ones on page 37, in a 2008 translation by Sarah Ruden. Montaigne reverts to them over the ensuing dozen pages; but the title chosen here for this astonishing Essay is accurate.]

•VIRTUE IN YOUTH AND IN OLD AGE•

[B] The more full and solid our practical thoughts are, the more they absorb and oppress us. Vice, death, poverty, illness are grave subjects that put a strain on us. The soul should be •instructed in the means of bearing evils and of fighting them off, •instructed in the rules for right living and right belief, and •often aroused and exercised in this fine study. But for a soul of the common sort this must be done with moderation and with breaks; a soul goes mad if it is too continuously tense.

In my youth I needed to warn and urge myself to arouse myself to keep to my duty; cheerfulness and good health do not go so well, it is said, with these wise and serious lines of thought. Nowadays I am in a different state. The conditions of old age warn me, sober me, and preach to me only too much. From excessive gaiety I have fallen into excessive seriousness, which is more disagreeable. So at this stage •in my life• I deliberately engage in a bit of debauchery, sometimes employing my soul on youthful wanton thoughts over which it can linger. From now on I am all too sedate, too heavy, and too mature. The years give me daily lectures on composure and on temperance. This body of mine flees from disorder and fears it. It is my body's turn now to guide my mind towards reform. It is *its* turn now to dominate, which it does more harshly and imperiously. It does not leave me an hour, sleeping or waking, free from lectures about death, patience, and penitence. I defend myself against temperance as I used to do against sensual pleasure, for temperance

pulls me too far back, to the point of numbness.

Now, I want to be master of myself in every direction. Wisdom has its excesses and needs moderation as much as folly does. So, fearing that I may dry up, wither, and grow heavy with wisdom, something that I do in the intervals that my ills allow me. . . .is to turn aside very gently and avert my eyes from this stormy and cloud-wracked sky that I have before me—which, thank God, I contemplate without terror, though not without strain and effort—and find myself spending time recalling periods of my past youth: 'My mind prefers what it has lost, and gives itself entirely over to by-gone memories' [Petronius].

Let childhood look ahead, old age backward; was not this the meaning of the double face of Janus? The years drag me along if they will, but facing backwards! While my eyes can still discern that beautiful season now expired, I will occasionally turn them that way. If youth has gone from my blood and my veins, at least I want not to uproot the picture of it from my memory: 'To be able to enjoy your former life again is to live twice' [Martial].

[C] Plato orders old men to attend the exercises, dancing and sports of the young, to enjoy in others the suppleness and beauty of body that they no longer have, and to recall to their memory the grace and privileges of that flowering age; and he wants them to award the victory •in those sports• to the young man who has most exhilarated and delighted the greatest number of them.

[B] Once I used to mark the dark and depressing days as extraordinary; they are now my ordinary days; it's the fine and serene ones that are extraordinary. I am close to the point where I shall jump for joy and accept as a new favour anything that does not actually hurt me. Tickle myself I may, but I cannot force a poor laugh out of this wretched body. I am cheerful only in fantasies and dreams, so as to •divert by

trickery the gloom of old age—a feeble struggle of art against nature! To •cure it would require more than a dream.

It is very silly to extend the period of our human ills by looking ahead to them, which everyone does, thereby being old before they are old! I would rather be old for less time. I snatch at even the slightest occasions of pleasure I can come across. I am aware of the view that several species of sensual pleasure are prudent, strong and glorious; this opinion has not enough power over me to give me an appetite for them. ^[C]I do not so much want noble, magnificent and ostentatious pleasures as ones that are sweet, easy, and ready to hand: ‘We are departing from what is natural, surrendering ourselves to the people, who are not a good guide in anything.’ [Seneca]

^[B] My philosophy lies in action, in natural and present practice, and little in fantasy. I wish I could enjoy playing at cobnut or with a top! . . .

Sensual pleasure is a rather unambitious quality; it thinks it is rich enough without adding the prize of reputation; it likes itself more in the shadows. We should take the whip to a young man who spends time savouring the tastes of wine and of sauces. There is nothing I knew or valued less. I am learning about those tastes now, I am ashamed to say: but what else am I to do? I am even more ashamed and angry at the causes that drive me to this. It is for us to trifle and play the fool, and for young men to stand on their reputation and in the best place. They are going towards the world, towards reputation; we are coming from it. ^[C]‘Let them have their arms, their horses, their spears, their swords, their contests in swimming and running; and from the many pastimes let our old men choose dice and knuckle-bones.’ [Cicero]

^[B] The very laws send us back to our homes. The least I can do on behalf of this wretched state my age is pushing me

into is to provide it with toys and pastimes—as is done for childhood, into which we are indeed falling back. Wisdom and folly will both have plenty to do if they are to support and help me by their alternate services in this calamity of old age: ‘Mix a dash of folly into your wisdom’ [Horace].

Likewise I flee from the slightest pin-pricks; ones that once would not have scratched me now run right through me. . . . I have always been delicately sensitive to attacks of pain; now I am still more tender, and exposed on all sides: ‘The least shock will shatter a cracked vessel’ [Ovid]. My judgement prevents me •from kicking and grumbling against the discomforts that nature orders me to endure, but not •from feeling them. I, who have no other goal but to live and enjoy myself, would run from one end of the world to the other to seek a single year of pleasant and cheerful tranquillity. There is plenty of sombre, dull tranquillity for me, but it sends me to sleep and stupifies me; I can never be satisfied by it. If there is any man or any good fellowship of men in town or country, in France or abroad, residing or travelling, who like my humours and whose humours I like, they have only to whistle and I’ll provide them with essays in flesh and bone.

Since it is the privilege of the mind to rescue itself from old age, I do all I can to counsel mine to do so. Let it meanwhile sprout green and flourish, if it can, like mistletoe on a dead tree. But I’m afraid it is a traitor; it is so closely bound in brotherhood to the body that it is constantly deserting me to follow my body in its need. I take it aside and flatter it, I work on it, all for nothing. In vain I try to turn it away from this attachment; I offer it Seneca and Catullus, and the ladies, and royal dances; but if its partner—the body—has colic, it seems to have it too! Even the activities that are uniquely the mind’s cannot then arouse it; they obviously smell of boredom and failure. There is no liveliness

in what the mind comes up with at a time when there is none in the body.

[C] Our masters—the professors of theology—are wrong when, seeking to explain the extraordinary flights of our mind, they attribute some of them to divine rapture, to love, to warlike fierceness, the harshness of war, to poetry, to wine, and do not allow a proper share to *health*—bubbling, vigorous, full, lazy health such as my green and care-free years used sometimes to provide me with. That joyful fire gives rise to flashes in our spirit; they are lively and bright beyond our natural reach; they are among the lustiest, though not the most frenzied, enthusiasms.

No wonder then if the opposite state weighs down my mind, grips it and produces an opposite effect. ‘No task can bring it to its feet: it languishes with the body.’ [Maximianus] Furthermore, my mind wants me to be grateful to it because, it says, it brings much less to this bond than is usual with most men. At least, while we have a truce, let us banish ills and difficulties from our interpersonal relations. ‘While it can, let old age smooth away the wrinkles on its brow’ [Horace]. ‘Gloomy things should be made pleasant by jests’ [Sidonius Apollinarius].

I like the kind of wisdom that is gay and companionable; I shun harsh *mœurs* [see Glossary] and austerity, and am suspicious of grim faces: ‘The sullen arrogance of a gloomy face’ [Buchanan]. ‘That sad group also has its sodomites’ [Martial].

[C] I wholeheartedly agree with Plato that easy or difficult humours are great predictors of the goodness or evil of the soul. Socrates had a settled expression, but a serene and smiling one, not settled like that of old Crassus who was never seen to smile. [B] Virtue is a pleasant and gay quality.

·THE ADVANTAGES OF COMPLETE OPENNESS·

I know well that most of those who will frown at the freedom of my writings have more to frown at in the freedom of their own thoughts! I conform well to their hearts, but I offend their eyes. What a well-ordered mind it is that can sample the writings of Plato and ignore his alleged affairs with Phaedo, Dion, Stella and Archeanassa! ‘Let us be not ashamed to say what we are not ashamed to think’ [author unknown; Montaigne?].

[B] I hate a morose and gloomy mind that glides over life’s pleasures but holds onto its misfortunes and feeds on them—like flies that cannot cling to a highly polished and smooth body and so cling to rough and rugged places and stay there. . . .

Furthermore, I have ordered myself to dare to say whatever I dare to do, and I dislike even having *thoughts* that I cannot publish. The worst of my deeds and qualities does not seem to me as ugly as the cowardice of not daring to avow them. Everyone is discreet in confessing; they ought to be discreet in acting; boldness in sinning is somewhat made up for—and bridled—by boldness in confessing it. [C] Anyone who obliged himself to *tell all* would be obliging himself to do nothing that we are forced to keep quiet about. God grant that •this excessive licence of mine may draw men to be free, rising above those cowardly counterfeit ‘virtues’ that are born of our imperfections, and •that at the expense of my own lack of moderation I may draw them to the point of reason!

If you are to tell of a vice of yours, you must first see it and study it. Those who hide it from others usually hide it from themselves. They hold that it is not sufficiently hidden if they can see it; they withdraw it and disguise it from their own conscience. ‘Why does nobody confess his faults? Because he is still in their grip; even now he remains within them.

Men can relate their dreams only after waking up' [Seneca].

The body's diseases become •clearer as they grow bigger; what we called a touch of rheumatism or a sprain turns out to be gout. But as the soul's diseases grow in strength they become •more obscure; the more •spiritually ill a man is, the less he realises it. That is why they often need to be probed in daylight, cut and torn from the hollow of our breast by a pitiless hand. What applies to the benefactions we receive applies to the evils that we do: sometimes the only way to requite them is to acknowledge them. Is there some ugliness in our wrong-doing that dispenses us from the duty of acknowledging it?

[B] It is painful for me to dissemble, so I avoid taking others' secrets into my keeping, not having the heart to disavow what I know. I can keep quiet about it, but I cannot deny it without strain and displeasure. To be really secret, one must be so by nature, not by obligation. In the service of princes, secret-keeping is small thing if one is not also a liar. A man asked Thales of Milesia whether he should deny on oath that he had been a lecher; if he had asked me, I would have replied that he should not do so, for lying seems to me worse than lechery. Thales counselled him differently, telling him to swear the oath so as to shield the greater fault by the lesser one. Yet this counsel means not so much choosing between vices as increasing their number.

Be it said in passing that if a man of conscience has to weigh •an awkward situation against •a vice, he can easily strike the right bargain; but if he is caught between two vices, he has to make a tough choice. This happened to Origen, who had either to commit idolatry or submit to being carnally enjoyed by a big ugly Ethiopian paraded before him. He submitted to the first condition, sinfully, it is said. So those women nowadays who protest to us that they would rather have ten men on their conscience than a

single Mass would—by their false standards—not be making a bad choice.

There may be a lack of discretion in publishing one's defects this way, but there is no great danger of its becoming customary by example, for Aristo •was right when he• said that the winds men most fear are those that uncover them. We must tuck up this stupid rag that covers our *mœurs*. . . .

As a courtesy to the Huguenots who damn our private auricular confession, I make my confession in public, religiously and purely. St Augustine, Origen and Hippocrates publicly admitted the error of their opinions; I include my *mœurs* •as having errors that should be confessed•. I hunger to make myself known, I don't care to how many, provided I do it truthfully. Or, to put it better, I hunger for nothing, but I go in mortal fear of being mistaken for someone else by those who come to know my name.

If a man does everything for honour and glory, what does he think he gains by appearing before the world in a mask, concealing his true being from the people's knowledge? If you praise a hunchback for his fine build, he ought to take it as an insult. If people honour you for valour when you are really a coward, are they talking about *you*? They mistake you for somebody else. . . .

When King Archelaus of Macedonia was going along the street, someone threw water on him. His entourage wanted to punish the man. 'Ah yes,' he said, 'but he threw water not on me but on the man he thought I was.' [C] When somebody told Socrates that people were speaking ill of him he said 'No! There is nothing of me in what they say.'

[B] As for me, if someone praised me for being a good navigator, for being very modest, or for being very chaste, I would not owe him any thanks. Similarly, if someone called me a traitor, a thief or a drunkard, I would not think it was *me* he attacked. Those who misjudge what they are like may

feed on false approval; not I, who I see myself and search myself right down to my depths; I know well what belongs to me. I am satisfied to be less praised, provided I am better known. . . .

·SEXUAL ACTIVITY·

It pains me that my Essays merely serve ladies as a routine piece of furniture—something to put into their salon. This chapter will get me into the private drawing-room. I prefer my dealings with women to be somewhat private; the public ones lack intimacy and savour.

In farewells we exaggerate our affection for the things we are leaving. I am taking a last leave of the world's pastimes; here are our final embraces. But let us come to my theme.

What has the sexual act—so natural, so necessary and so right—done to mankind to make us unable to speak of it without shame and to exclude it from serious and decent conversation? We boldly utter the words 'kill', 'rob' and 'betray'; but *that* one we only dare [see Glossary] to mutter through our teeth. Does this mean that the less we breathe a word about it the more right we have to let it fill our thoughts?

[c] It is notable that the words least in use, least written and most hushed up are the best known and most widely recognised. To people of every age and every *mœurs* they are as well known as 'bread'. They are imprinted on everyone without being expressed; they have no voice, no spelling. It is notable¹ too this is an act that we have placed under the protection of silence, from which it is a crime to drag it out even to accuse and judge it. We dare not even whip it except in a roundabout and figurative way. What a favour to a criminal if he is so abominable that even the laws think it illicit to touch him or to see him! He is free and saved

through the kindness of the severity of his condemnation.

Is it not the same concerning books, which become all the more saleable and public by being suppressed? Personally, I intend to take Aristotle's advice literally: he says that bashfulness serves as an ornament in youth but a reproach in old age.

[B] In the school of the ancients—the school I cling to far more than to the modern, its virtues seeming greater to me and its vices less—these verses are preached: 'Those who excessively strive to flee from Venus fail just like those who follow her excessively.' [Plutarch] 'Thou alone, O goddess, rulest over the totality of nature; without thee nothing comes to the heavenly shores of light, nothing is joyful, nothing lovable.' [Lucretius]

I do not know who put Pallas and the Muses on bad terms with Venus and made them cold towards Cupid; yet I know of no deities better suited or more indebted to one another. Anyone who removes from the Muses their amorous fancies will be robbing them of the finest entertainment they can offer and of the noblest subject-matter of their works; and anyone who makes Cupid lose contact with poetry and its services will be disarming him of his best weapons. That opens the way to accusing both •the god of intimacy and affection and •the patron goddesses of humanity and justice with the vice of ingratitude and lack of appreciation.

I have not been so long struck off the roll of Cupid's attendants that I don't retain memories of his powers and merits: 'I know the traces of the ancient flame' [Virgil]. There is still some emotion and heat after the fever: 'Let me not lack that warmth in my winter years' [Johannus Secundus]. Dried out and weighed down as I am, I still feel some tepid remains of that past ardour: 'As the Aegean sea, when those winds

¹ [The two occurrences of 'It is notable' in this paragraph are a guess-work rendering of *Il est bon que*.]

have died that recently whipped and churned it up, does not at once grow calm but retains the roar and surge of the huge and thrashing waves' [Tasso]. To the best of my knowledge the powers and values of that god are found more alive and animated in the depictions of poetry than in their proper essence. . . .

Poetry presents an indefinable mood that is more amorous than love itself. Venus is not as beautiful—quite naked, alive and panting—as she is here in Virgil:

He wavered. Tenderly the goddess wrapped him
 In her white arms and fondled him. In no time
 He took in the familiar flame. The old heat
 Ran through his bones and shook him to the
 marrow,
 As when a streak of flame, ripped lose by thunder,
 Flashes and shoots through clouds with its intense
 light.

* * * * *

He then made tender love to her and melted
 Into sweet slumber in his wife's embrace.

·SEX AND MARRIAGE·

What I find worth thinking about here is that he portrays her as a little too passionate for a married Venus. Within that wise contract, our sexual desires are not so wanton; they are darkened and more blunted. Cupid hates couples to be held together by anything but himself, and takes a slack part in partnerships that are set up and maintained under another title, as is marriage, where connections and wealth rightly weigh at least as much as graces and beauty. A man does not marry for himself, whatever he says; he marries at least as much for his posterity, for his family. . . . That is why I like the practice of having marriages arranged at the hands of a third party rather than our own, and by the

sense of others rather than our own. How contrary all that is to the conventions of love! So it is a kind of incest to employ in this venerable and sacred alliance the rapturous strivings of love's licentiousness (I think I have already said this somewhere). Aristotle says that a man should touch his wife prudently and soberly, for fear that by caressing her too lasciviously he might drive her out of her mind. What he says for our moral sense the doctors say for our ·bodily· health's sake: that a pleasure that is too hot, voluptuous and assiduous spoils the seed and hinders conception. They say, on the other hand, that for a kind of intercourse that is feeble (as this ·married· kind is, by nature) to be filled with a just and fertile heat, it should be undertaken rarely and at stated intervals. . . . I see no marriages that are sooner troubled and fail than those that progress by beauty and amorous desires. Marriage needs foundations that are more solid and durable; and we must keep on the alert. That boiling rapture is no good for it.

·AN ASIDE ON NOBILITY·

Those who think to honour marriage by joining love to it strike me as being like those who to promote virtue hold that nobility *is* virtue. Between these two there is some relationship, but great differences as well, There is no point in mixing up their names and titles; we wrong one or the other by confusing them. Nobility is a fine quality, and introduced with reason; but since it depends on others, and can fall to a vicious and worthless man, it is well below virtue in esteem. If it is a virtue at all, it is one that is

- artificial and visible,
- dependent on time and fortune,
- differing in style in various countries,
- living and mortal,
- having no more origin than the river Nile,

- genealogical and not individual,
- a matter of succession and resemblance. . . .

Knowledge, strength, goodness, beauty, riches—indeed all other qualities—can be passed along and shared, whereas *this* one is self-devouring, of no use in the service of others.

It was explained to one of our kings that a choice had to be made between two candidates for the same office: one was a nobleman, the other not. He ordered his people to choose, without regard to this quality, the one who had the greater merit; but if the worth should be exactly equal, they should in that case take nobility into account. That was giving it exactly its proper place. When a young unproven man asked Antigonus for the position held by his father—a valiant man who had just died—he replied: ‘My friend, in such promotions I have less regard for my soldiers’ nobility than for their prowess.’

[C] . . . The people of Calicut make their nobility into a superhuman species. Marriage is forbidden them, as is any profession but war. They can have their fill of concubines, and their women may have as many lovers; there is no jealousy here; but it is a capital and unpardonable crime to mate with anyone of a different rank. They feel defiled if they are even touched by them [i.e. by non-nobles] as they go by; and as their nobility is marvellously polluted and tainted by this, they kill those who have merely come a little too close to them; so that non-noble folk are forced to cry out at street corners as they walk along, like gondoliers in Venice, to avoid colliding; and the nobles order them to move aside in whatever direction they want. By such means the nobility avoid a disgrace that they consider indelible; the others avoid certain death. No stretch of time, no princely favour, no office, valour or wealth can enable a commoner to become a nobleman. This is reinforced by their custom of forbidding marriages across trades: a girl from a shoemaker’s

family cannot marry a carpenter; and parents are obliged to train their sons for their father’s calling—exactly that one: no other will do. By such means the distinctness and permanence of their status is secured.

·NOW BACK TO MARRIAGE·

[B] A good marriage, if there is such a thing, rejects the company and conditions of •love; it tries to reproduce those of •friendship. It is a sweet association in life, full of constancy, trust and countless useful and solid services and mutual obligations. No woman who savours the taste of it—‘whom the marriage-torch has joined with its long-desired light’ [Catullus]—would want to have the place of a •mistress or paramour to her husband. She is lodged in his affection far more honourably and securely if she is lodged there as a •wife. Even when he is swept off his feet with passion for someone else, let him be asked

- Would he prefer some shame to fall on his wife or his mistress?
- Whose misfortune would afflict him more?
- For which of them does he desire the greater respect?

In a sound marriage such questions admit of no doubt.

The price and the value of marriage is indicated by the fact that so few good ones are seen. Shape it well and accept it rightly and there is no finer element in our society. We cannot do without it, yet we go about debasing it. The upshot is like what is seen with cages: the birds outside are desperate to get in, and the ones inside are equally anxious to get out. [C] When Socrates was asked whether it was more appropriate to take or not to take a wife, he replied, ‘Whichever you do, you will be sorry.’ [B] It is a contractual engagement to which can be exactly applied the saying: ‘Man is to man either a god or a wolf.’ Many qualities must come together to construct it. Marriage is found nowadays to be better suited to simple and

commonplace souls, where luxury, curiosity and idleness do not disturb it so much. Unruly humours such as mine, loathing all bonds and obligations, are less fit for it: 'For me it is sweeter to live with no chain about my neck' [Maximianus].

Of my own choice, I would have fled from marrying Wisdom herself if she wanted me. But say what we will, the customs and practices of ordinary life carry us along. Most of my doings are governed by example, not by choice. Anyway, I did not really bid myself to it [i.e. to marriage]; I was led there, brought to it by external considerations. For not only inconvenient things, but anything at all, however ugly, vicious or repulsive, can become acceptable through some condition or circumstance. . . . And I was borne into it worse prepared and more recalcitrant than I am now after having tried it.

·FIDELITY IN MARRIAGE·

And, licentious though I am held to be, I have in truth more rigidly observed the laws of matrimony than I had either promised or hoped. It is no longer time to kick when we have let ourselves be hobbled! A man should husband his freedom wisely; but once he has been subjected to ·marriage-obligation, he should keep to it under the laws of common duty, ·or· at least try to. Those ·husbands· who make this bargain and then behave with hatred and contempt are acting unjustly and harmfully. Equally unfair and hard is that fine rule that I see passed from hand to hand—like a sacred oracle—among the women: 'Serve your husband as your master, and guard against him as a traitor.' Which means 'Behave towards him with a constrained, hostile and suspicious reverence'—a challenge and a call to battle.

I am too soft for such thorny designs. To tell the truth, I have not yet attained the perfection of cleverness and refinement of wit that confuses reason with injustice, and

ridicules any order and rule that does not accord with my appetite. . . . Let us pass on.

Our poet ·Virgil· portrays a marriage full of concord and harmony, in which however there is not much fidelity. Did he mean to say that it is not impossible to surrender to the attacks of Cupid [see Glossary] and yet nevertheless to keep a sense of duty towards one's marriage; that one may injure marriage without tearing it totally apart? ^[C] A valet can cheat his master without hating him! ^[B] A wife may be attracted to a stranger by beauty, opportunity, destiny—

for destiny has a hand in it too: 'There's a destiny that rules the parts our cothes conceal; if the stars forsake you, it will do you no good to have a member of unheard-of length' [Juvenal]

—yet not be so totally ·attracted·, perhaps, that she does not still have some tie to her husband. They—love and marriage—are two projects that go by separate and distinct roads. A woman may give herself to a man whom she would not at all want to have married—I don't mean because of the state of his finances but because of his personal qualities. Few men have married their mistresses and not repented of it. ^[C] That even applies to the other world. What a wretched household Jupiter had with his wife, whom he had first frequented and enjoyed in love affairs! That is, as the saying goes, to shit in the basket and then put it on your head.

^[B] I have in my time seen, in a high place, love shamefully and dishonourably cured by a marriage; the considerations are too different. We have no difficulty loving two different and contrary things. Isocrates said that the city of Athens was pleasing in the same way as a mistress served for love; everyone loves to come and wander around and spend time there, but no-one loved it well enough to marry it, that is, to reside and settle down there. I have been angry to see a husbands hating b their wives precisely because a they are

doing **b** them wrong. At least we should not love them less for our fault; at least they ought to be made dearer to us by our regrets and our sympathy.

They are different ends and yet (he is saying) they are somehow compatible. For its share, marriage has usefulness, justice, honour and constancy—a flat but more universal pleasure. Love is based on pleasure alone; and in truth its pleasure is more stimulating, lively and keen, a pleasure set ablaze by difficulties. It must have stabs of pain and anguish. Without arrows and flames, Cupid is no longer Cupid. The liberality of women is too profuse in marriage, and dulls the edge of passion and desire. ^[c] See the trouble that Lycurgus and Plato give themselves, in their laws, to avoid this disadvantage.

^[b] Women are not at all wrong when they reject the moral rules proclaimed in society, inasmuch as it is the men who have made them without consulting the women. There is naturally some strife and wrangling between them and us; the closest communion we have with them remains turbulent and tempestuous.

In the opinion of our author, ·Virgil·, we treat women without due consideration, in the following way.

·WHAT WOMEN'S REAL NEEDS AND CAPACITIES ARE·

We realise that women have an incomparably greater capacity for the act of love than we do and desire it more ardently. **(i)** We know that this fact was attested in antiquity by that priest ·Tiresias· who had been first a man and then a woman: 'He knew Venus from both angles' [Ovid]. **(ii)** Moreover, we have learned of the evidence that was provided in different centuries by an emperor [Proculus] and an empress [Messalina] of Rome, masters at this work, and famous for it. (We know of their exploits from their own mouths.) He deflowered ten captive Sarmatian virgins in one night; but *she* in one night

was good for 25 encounters, changing partners according to her needs and preferences: 'At last she retired, her secret parts burning and tense with lust, exhausted by men but not yet satisfied' [Juvenal]. **(iii)** Then there was the plea lodged in Catalonia by a wife as plaintiff against her husband's too assiduous efforts; not, I think, because she was actually troubled by it. . . .but rather to have a pretext for pruning back and curbing the authority of husbands over their wives in the basic act of marriage, and also to show that the nagging and spitefulness of wives goes beyond the marriage-bed and tramples underfoot the graces and sweets of Venus. Her husband, a really depraved brute of a fellow, responded to this complaint that even on fast days he could not manage with fewer than ten times. Whereupon the good queen of Aragon, after mature deliberation with her council, intervened with the notable judgement—to provide for all time a rule and example of the moderation and modesty required in a proper marriage—that it is necessary to limit intercourse to six times a day; sacrificing much of the needs and desires of her sex in order, she said, to establish a scale that would be unexacting and therefore durable and unchanging. At which the doctors [here = 'academic moralists'] exclaim: What must the lusts and the appetites of women be if *that* is the rate set by their reason, their reformation, and their virtue, given the disparity of judgements on our appetites, and given that Solon, the head of the school of lawgivers, aims to avoid failure by setting the rate for such conjugal intimacy at three times a month?

·WHAT WE DO ABOUT THIS·

Having believed and taught all this, we proceed to assign to women sexual restraint as their particular share, under pain of punishments of the utmost severity. No passion is more urgent than this, yet we want them alone to resist it—not

simply as an ordinary vice but as an abomination and a curse, worse than irreligion and parricide; while *we* give way to it without blame or reproach. Even those who have tried to overcome it have sufficiently admitted the difficulty—or rather the impossibility—they had encountered in subduing, weakening, and cooling off the body by material remedies. Yet *we* want *them* to be •healthy, energetic, buxom, and well-nourished, and at the same time •chaste; both hot and cold at once. For marriage, which we say has the function of saving them from burning,¹ brings them but little cooling-off, given our *mœurs*. (i) If they take a husband in whom the vigour of youth is still boiling, he will boast of scattering it elsewhere: ‘A little more propriety, please, or I’ll take you to law. I paid a heavy price for your penis; it is not yours, Bassus; you have sold it’ [Martial]. (c) The philosopher Polemon was justly brought to justice by his wife, for sowing on a barren field the fruitful seed he owed to her fertile one. (ii) (B) If they take one of those broken-down ones, there they are in full wedlock worse off than virgins and widows. We take them to be well provided for because they have a man beside them—

just as the Romans assumed that the Vestal Virgin called Clodia Laeta had been raped simply because Caligula had made an approach to her, even though it was attested that that is all he had done

—but on the contrary their need is *increased* by their married state; because their ardour, which would have remained calm in their single state, is awoken by contact with any male company whatsoever. That explains why those monarchs of Poland, Boleslaus and Kinge his consort, agreed together to

take the vow of chastity on their wedding-day as they lay side by side, maintaining it in the teeth of the pleasure marriage offers; such considerations and circumstances made their chastity more meritorious.

·TRAINING WOMEN IN THE PRACTICES OF LOVE·

We train them from childhood in the ways of love: their grace, their clothes, their knowledge, their way of speaking—all their instruction has that one goal. Thie governesses impress on them nothing but the face of love, if only to disgust them with it by continually portraying it to them. My daughter—I have no other children—is of an age when the more passionate girls are legally allowed to marry. Her constitution makes her young for her age; she is slender and soft. Having been brought up by her mother in a quiet and private way, she is only just beginning to grow out of the naiveté of childhood. She was reading from a French book in my presence, and came across the word *fouteau*, the name of a well-known tree.² The woman she has for governess pulled her up short rather roughly and made her pass over that awkward bit. I let her do this, so as not to interfere with their rules, for I play no part at all in that upbringing; feminine government goes its own mysterious way; it should be left to them. But unless I am mistaken the company of twenty lackeys could not have imprinted on her imagination in six months the understanding of what those wicked syllables mean—how they are used and what they imply—that this good old women instilled by her one reprimand and prohibition: ‘The maid ripe for marriage loves to learn the steps of the Ionic dance, and to imitate those lascivious movements. Indeed, from

¹ [‘But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn’, 1 Corinthians 7:9]

² [It means ‘beech’, but the episode that Montaigne reports here comes from its similarity to *foutre*, which was on a par in meaning and in vulgarity-level with ‘fuck’.]

to glory in the enjoyment they have from it; and when they become widows they push it back and bury it under their hair. The wisest of the Roman matrons were granted the honour of offering crowns of flowers to the god Priapus; when their maidens came to marry, they were required to sit on his least decent parts.

I'm not sure that I haven't seen in my own lifetime something like a similar devotion. What was the meaning of that ridiculous flap that our fathers wore on their breeches, which is still seen on our Swiss ·guards·? Even today, why do we parade the shape of our genitals behind our breeches, and—what is worse—cheat and deceive by exaggerating their natural size? [C] I am tempted to believe that this sort of garment was invented in better and more conscientious ages so as not to deceive people, each man gallantly rendering in public an account of his endowments. . . .

[B] **That fine fellow** who when I was young castrated so many beautiful ancient statues in his great city so as not to corrupt our gaze—[C] following the advice of that other ancient worthy: 'Nude bodies shown in public lead to shameful acts' [Ennius]—[B] ought to have called to mind that (as in the mysteries of the Bona Dea, where all signs of masculinity were excluded) he would achieve nothing unless he also gelded horses, donkeys and finally everything in nature: 'All species on earth—both man and brute, dwellers in the sea, and flocks and painted birds—all dash madly into the flames of desire' [Virgil].

[C] The gods, says Plato, have supplied us with a rebellious and tyrannical member which, like an animal on the rampage, tries by the violence of its appetite to force everything to submit to it. To women too they have given a gluttonous and voracious animal which, if denied its food in due season, becomes frenzied and can brook no delay; breathes its raging madness into their bodies, blocks the passages, stops the

breathing, so causing a thousand sorts of ills, until it has sucked in the fruit of the common thirst and used it to irrigate and fertilise the depth of the womb.

[B] Now, **that lawgiver of mine** ought also to have called to mind that it is perhaps a more chaste and fruitful practice to let them know the living reality early, rather than leaving them to guess at it according to the freedom and heat of their imagination. Led by desire and hope, they replace the real ·sexual· parts by others up to three times as big. . . .

What harm is done by those enormous pictures that boys scatter over the corridors and staircases of our royal palaces ! They give women a cruel misunderstanding of our natural [here = actual] capacities. [C] For all we know, that may have been what Plato had in mind when he decreed—following the practice of other states with sound institutions—that men and women, old and young, should appear naked before each other in their gymnastic exercises. [B] The Indian women who see men in the raw have at least cooled their visual senses.

[Then half a page, mostly [C]-tagged, about the different views that have been held about the effect on virtue of visible nudity.]

·RETURNING TO WHAT WE DO ABOUT WOMEN'S NEEDS·

In short, we lure and excite them by every means; we constantly heat and stimulate their imagination; and then we gripe.

Let us admit it: there is hardly one of us •who is not more afraid of the disgrace that comes to him from his wife's vices than from his own; •who is not more concerned (what amazing charity!) for his dear wife's conscience than for his own; who would not rather commit theft and sacrilege, or that his wife were a murderer or a heretic, than not have her more chaste than he is. And our women would much rather

go to the law-courts in search of fees in the law-courts, or to the battlefield in search of reputations, than to have to mount such a difficult guard in the midst of idleness and pleasures. Don't they see that there is no merchant, no lawyer, no soldier who does not drop what he is doing so as to run after this other [i.e. to run towards a sexual escapade], nor any porter or cobbler, however weary with toil and faint with hunger? . . . $\dot{\imath}_{\dot{\imath}}^{1/2}\dot{\imath}_{\dot{\imath}}^{1/2}\dot{\imath}_{\dot{\imath}}^{1/2}$

[C] Iniquitous appraisal of vices! Both men and women are capable of a thousand corrupt activities more harmful and unnatural than lasciviousness. But *we* create vices and weigh them not according to their nature but according to our self-interest, which gives them so many unequal shapes. [This seems to mean: 'so many shapes different from what they are actually like'.] The severity of our decrees makes women's engaging in this vice more vicious and ferocious than its nature warrants, and involves it in consequences worse than their cause.

[B] I'm not even sure that the campaigns of Caesar and Alexander surpass the stern resolve of a beautiful young woman, brought up in *our* way, in full view of and contact with the social world, and assailed by numerous examples to the contrary, keeping herself intact in the midst of a thousand continual and powerful solicitations. No *doing* is more thorny or more active than this *not doing*. I think it easier to keep on a suit of armour all one's life than to keep a maidenhead. And so the vow of virginity is the noblest of all the vows and also the harshest. [C] As Saint Jerome says, 'The Devil's power is in the loins'.

[B] We have certainly assigned to the ladies the most arduous and vigorous of human duties, and we leave them the glory of it, which should serve them as a singular spur to persevere in it. This is a fine occasion for them to defy us and trample underfoot that vain pre-eminence in valour and virtue that we claim over them. They will find, if they pay

attention, that it will make them not only much admired but also better loved.

·COURTSHIP·

A gallant man does not abandon his suit because he is refused, provided that the refusal is based on chastity, not on preference for someone else. We can swear, threaten and complain all we like; we are lying; we love them all the better for it. There is no allurements like wise conduct that is not heartless and surly. It is stupid and base to persist in face of hatred and contempt; but it is the exercise of a noble and magnanimous soul to persist in face of a virtuous and constant resolution mingled with an appreciative good-will.

They can recognise our services up to a certain degree, and honourably make us feel that they do not disdain us. [C] For the law that commands them to detest us because we worship them, and hate us because we love them, is indeed cruel, if only for the hardship it causes. Why should ladies not lend an ear to our requests and offers of service, provided they do not go beyond the bounds of their duty of modesty? What are we up to when we assume that they have some inner licentiousness of thought? A Queen in our own time used to say shrewdly that to shut out those advances was a sign of frailty and an accusation of one's own *facilité* [here = 'accusation that one is easy to persuade'], and that a lady who had not been tempted could not boast of her chastity.

[B] The boundaries of honour are by no means so narrowly drawn. It has room to relax; it can allow itself some freedom without transgressing. Along its frontiers there is territory that is free, indifferent [here = 'neither good or bad'], neutral. If a man has been able to pursue her honour and to bring it to bay in its own corner and stronghold, then he is a stupid fool if he is not satisfied with his fortune. The value of a victory is set by its difficulty. Do you want to know

what impact your courtship and your merits have had on her heart? Measure it by her *mœurs*. . . . The obligation for a benefit depends entirely on the will of the one who grants it. The other circumstances that enter into a benefit are dumb, dead, and fortuitous. It costs her more to give that little than it costs her companions to give everything. If rarity is valuable in anything, it must be so in this case; consider not •how little it is but •how few have it. The value of money changes with the coinage and the place where it is minted.

Whatever some men may be brought to say by frustration and bad judgement at the height of their distress, virtue and truth always regain the advantage. I have known women whose reputation was unjustly damaged over a long period and who were later restored to the unanimous esteem of mankind by their constancy alone, without effort or artifice. Everyone is sorry and retracts what he once believed. After being slightly suspect girls, they now hold the foremost rank among good and honoured women. When someone said to Plato ‘Everyone is speaking ill of you’, he said ‘Let them. I will live in a way that will make them change their tune.’

Besides •the fear of God and •the prize of so rare a glory, which must incite women to preserve themselves, •the corruption of our times forces them to do so; and if I were in their place, I would do *anything* rather than entrust my reputation to such dangerous hands. In my day, the pleasure of telling of an affair (a pleasure almost as sweet as the thing itself) was permitted only to those who had one single faithful friend •and were telling of their affair with her•; nowadays, the most usual talk at table and when men get together consists of boasts about favours received and the secret liberality of the ladies. Truly one must be abject and base in heart to allow these tender gifts to be thus cruelly persecuted, ransacked, and pawed over by such ungrateful, indiscreet and fickle persons.

•JEALOUSY•

It is our exaggerated and improper harshness towards this vice—namely, non-chastity—that gives birth to jealousy, the most vain and tempestuous malady afflicting human souls: ‘Whatever stops us lighting one torch from another’s light?’ [Ovid] ‘They can go on giving; still nothing is lost’ [Priapeia]. Jealousy and its sister envy seem to me to be the most absurd of the bunch. About envy I can say almost nothing; this passion, which is portrayed as so strong and violent, is kind enough to have no hold on me. As for jealousy, I know it—by sight at least. Beasts can feel it too. When the shepherd Crastis fell in love with a nanny-goat, her mate was drawn by jealousy to charge him while he slept, butting his head and smashing it.

We have raised this fever to an excessive pitch, after the example of some barbarian nations. The better disciplined ones have been touched by it, which is reasonable, but not carried away: ‘There, never did adulterer stain with his blood the waters of Styx while he lay pierced by a husband’s sword.’ [Johannes Secundus] Lucullus, Caesar, Pompey, Antony, Cato and other fine men were cuckolds and knew it: they never made a commotion about it. In those days only one man who died of distress over it, namely Lepidus; who was a fool. . . . And when the god of our poet •Virgil• surprised one of his comrades lying with his wife, he was satisfied with putting them to shame; ‘And one wag among the gods wished that he could be shamed in that way!’ [Horace]. [There’s a half-page more about the attitudes in play when Vulcan discovers his wife Venus in the arms of Mars. Then a slight change of topic.]

As for the confusion of children, ^[C] apart from the fact that the gravest of lawgivers want it and legislate for it in their republics, ^[B] it does not affect the women, •who know which children are theirs, whereas a jealous husband may

be uncertain which are his. Yet this passion of jealousy is, I don't know how, more firmly seated in them than in men: 'Even Juno, the greatest goddess among the dwellers in heaven, feels the scourge of jealousy over her consort's daily wrongs' [Catullus]. When jealousy seizes these poor, weak defenceless souls, it is pitiful how it drags them about and cruelly tyrannises over them. It slips into them under the title of loving affection; but once it possesses them, those same causes that served as a basis for good-will now serve as a basis for deadly hatred. ^[C] Of all the illnesses of the mind, jealousy has the most things that feed it and the fewest things to remedy it. ^[B] The virtue, health, merit and reputation of the husband set fire to their [i.e. the wives'] ill will and fury: 'No hatreds are as bitter as those of love' [Propertius].

This fever uglifies and corrupts all that is otherwise beautiful and good in them; in a jealous woman, no matter how chaste she is and how good a housewife, every action smacks of bitterness and bullying. It is a frenzied agitation that drives them to an extreme completely contrary to what causes it. A good example of this flip between extremes was a man called Octavius in Rome. After lying with Pontia Posthumia, his delight in this so increased his love that he sought most urgently to marry her. When he could not win her over, his extreme love hurled him headlong into deeds of most cruel and mortal hatred; and he killed her. Similarly, the ordinary symptoms of that other love-sickness are intestine hatreds, plots, conspiracies—'We all know what a woman's rage can do' [Virgil]—and a fury that is all the more gnawing for being compelled to justify itself under the pretext of good-will.

·CHASTITY·

Now, the duty of chastity is wide-ranging. Is it *the will* that we want them [i.e. our women] to bridle? But the will is a

supple and active element; it is too quick to be held down. . . . It is not in their power—or perhaps in the power of chastity herself (she is female)—to protect themselves from sexual desire and lust. So if our sole concern is with their will, where do we stand? Imagine the great rush if man had the privilege of being borne on wings

the next phrase: *sans yeux et sans langue*

literally meaning: without eyes and without tongue

probable meaning here: with no-one to see or gossip about what he is doing

to the lap of every woman who would have him! ^[C] The Scythian women put out the eyes of all their slaves and prisoners of war in order to make use of them more freely and secretly.

Oh, what a terrific advantage lies in opportuneness! If I were asked what the first thing is in love, I would reply that it is knowing how to seize an opportunity; the second likewise, and the third as well. It is a factor that can achieve anything.

I have often lacked good fortune, but also sometimes lacked initiative. . . . These days love calls for more boldness, which our young men excuse on the pretext of ardour; but if women looked into the matter closely, they would find that it arises rather from lack of respect. I used to be devoutly afraid of giving offence, and am inclined to respect what I love. Besides, in these negotiations if you remove the respect you rub out the glamour. I like a lover to somewhat play the child, the timid slave, the servant. If not in this situation precisely but in others, I do have something of the stupid bashfulness that Plutarch speaks of; the course of my life has been harmed and blemished by it in various ways. It is a quality very ill-suited to my overall character; but then what are we but indiscipline and contradiction?

I am as sensitive about giving a refusal as about receiving one. It so weighs on me to weigh on others that when duty forces me to put pressure on someone's will in a doubtful matter where he has something to lose, I do it half-heartedly and against my grain. But if it concerns my own interests—^[C] though Homer says truly that bashfulness is a stupid virtue in a needy man—^[B] I usually engage a third person to blush in my place. I find it equally difficult to deny those who ask a service of me: I have occasionally had the will to refuse but not the strength.

So it is folly to try to bridle in women a desire that is so burning and so natural to them. And when I hear them boasting of how cold and virginal their wills are, I laugh at them; that really is leaning too far backward. It would have at least some appearance of truth (even if not completely credible) in the case of a toothless and decrepit old woman or a young one wasted by tuberculosis. But women who still live and breathe worsen the terms of the bargain by saying this, since ill-advised excuses serve as accusations. Like one of the gentlemen in my neighbourhood who was suspected of impotence. . . . Two or three days after his wedding, to prove his masculinity he went about boasting that he had ridden his wife twenty times the previous night. That was cited later to convict him of absolute ignorance and to annul the marriage.

Besides, those women are saying nothing worthwhile; for there is neither continence nor virtue if there is no urge to the contrary. 'That is true,' they should say, 'but I am not ready to give myself up.' The very saints put it thus. I am talking of women who seriously boast of their cold chastity and indifference, keeping a straight face and wanting to be believed. For when it is with an affected countenance in which the eyes belie their words, and with the jargon of their profession that has its effect in reverse, that's fine by me. I

am a strong admirer of naturalness and freedom; but there is no way out of it: if it is not completely simple and childish, it is unbecoming to ladies and out of place in this matter of courtship, and quickly turns into impudence. Their disguises and their shapes deceive only fools. Lying is in the seat of honour; it is a detour that brings us to the truth by the back door.

If we cannot hold back their imagination, what do we expect from them? Action? There are plenty of actions that corrupt chastity but escape the knowledge of others: 'What is done unwitnessed is done often' [Martial]. And the ones we fear the least are perhaps the most to be feared: women's silent sins are the worst. . . .

[Then a ^[C]-tagged passage about ways in which a woman's hymen may be ruptured without her losing her chastity—horse-riding, a careless obstetrician, etc.]

We could not precisely delimit for them the actions that we forbid them. We must frame our law in vague general terms. The very idea we form of their chastity is ridiculous; the extreme models of it that I know include •Fatua, the wife of Faunus, who after her wedding never let herself be seen by any man whatever, and •the wife of Hiero, who didn't realise that her husband's breath stank, thinking this was a quality common to all men. To satisfy us they have to be invisible and insensible [= 'not detectable by any of the other senses'].

So now let us admit that the crucial element in judging this duty lies principally in the will. Some husbands have suffered adultery not only without reproach or hostility towards their wives but with a strong sense of obligation to them and acknowledgement of their virtue. Many a woman who loved her honour more than her life has nevertheless prostituted herself to the insane lusts of a deadly enemy in order to save her husband's life, doing for him what she would never have done for herself. This is not the place to

dwell on such examples. They are too splendid and sublime to be rehearsed in the light of this chapter: let us keep them for a nobler place. [Then most of a page of extremely various ‘examples that shine with a more vulgar light’, after which Montaigne turns to the situation of husbands who don’t have this more-than-permissive attitude to their wives’ unchastity.]

·AN ASIDE ON CUCKOLDRY·

[B] Then what is the fruit of this painful anxiety? For however *justified* jealousy is, it remains to be seen whether suffering it *does* anything for us. Is there any man who thinks to shackle his women by his ingenuity? ‘Lock her up; shut her in. But who will guard the guardians? Your wife is clever: she will start with them!’ [Juvenal] What trick won’t suffice for them in such a knowing time ·as ours·?

Curiosity is always a fault, but here it is pernicious. It is folly to want to be enlightened about a disease

- for which there is no medicine that does not make it worse;
- the shame of which is increased and spread abroad chiefly by jealousy;
- the avenging of which hurts our children more than it cures us.

You wither and die in the search for such a hidden proof. How wretched are those husbands in my time whose search has succeeded!

If the informer does not present at the same time the remedy and his help, his information is noxious, and deserves a dagger-thrust more than if he called you a liar. The husband who works to do something about it [i.e. about his being a cuckold] is laughed at just as much as the one who knows nothing about it. Cuckoldry has an indelible stamp; once a man is branded with it he has it for ever; the punishment makes it

public more than the fault does. It’s a fine thing to to see our private misfortunes torn out of the shadows and doubt, to be trumpeted on the theatrical stage, especially misfortunes that hurt only by being related. Marriages and wives are called ‘good’ not because they are good but because they are not talked about.

We should use our ingenuity to *avoid* getting this annoying and useless knowledge. It was the custom of the Romans when returning home from a journey to send word ahead to announce their arrival to their womenfolk so as not to surprise them. Similarly, a certain nation has introduced the custom that on the day of the wedding the priest opens the way to the bride, to free the groom from doubt and from pressure to investigate whether in this first trial she comes to him a virgin or damaged by someone else’s love.

‘But people talk!’ I know a hundred honourable men who are cuckolded, honourably and not very discreditably. A decent man is pitied for it, not despised. See to it that your misfortune is smothered by your virtue, so that good folk curse the cause of it and the man who wrongs you trembles to think of it. And then who is not talked about for this, from the least ·instance of cuckoldry· to the greatest? . . . Do you see how many honourable men have been included in this reproach in your presence? Don’t think that in other contexts *you* are spared.

‘But even the ladies will laugh at it!’ ·What does their mockery matter?· What do they laugh at more readily these days than a peaceful, orderly marriage? [C] Each one of you has cuckolded somebody. Well, nature is all equivalences—compensation and tit for tat. [B] The frequency of this event ought by now to have moderated its bitterness; it will soon have become customary.

This wretched misery is one you cannot even tell anyone about. . . . For what friend can you dare to confide your

worries to? Even if he does not laugh at you, will he not be put on the track and shown how to join in the kill?

[c] Wise men keep secret both the sweets of marriage and its bitternesses. For a talkative man like me, of all the distressing disadvantages of marriage one of the principal ones is this: custom has made it improper and prejudicial to tell anyone all that one knows and feels about it.

·BACK TO JEALOUSY·

[b] It would be a waste of time to give women the same advice in order to make jealousy distasteful to them. Their essence is so steeped in suspicion, vanity and curiosity that there is no hope of curing them ·of jealousy· by legitimate means. They often recover from this ailment by a form of health that is much more to be feared than the malady. Just as there are enchantments that can remove an evil only by loading it onto someone else, so too they readily transfer this fever ·of jealousy· to their husbands when they lose it.

All the same, to tell the truth, I do not know whether one can suffer anything worse from them than their jealousy; it is the most dangerous of their characteristics, as the head is the most dangerous part of their body. Pittacus said that every man has his curse: his was his wife's bad head [here = 'temper'], but for which he would think himself entirely happy. That's a *very* heavy misfortune that such a just, wise, valiant man should feel spoils the whole state of his life; what are we little fellows to do ·about it·?

[c] The senate of Marseilles was right to grant the request of the man who asked permission to kill himself so as to escape his wife's petulance, for this is a malady that can never be removed except by amputation; the only effective remedies for it are •flight and •endurance, both of which are very hard. [b] That man knew what he was talking about, it seems to me, who said that a good marriage needs a blind

wife and a deaf husband.

·DON'T OVER-PRESSURE WOMEN WITH OBLIGATIONS·

Let us see to it that the great and intense rigour of the obligation we lay on them [i.e. women] does not produce two effects contrary to our purpose: **(i)** whetting the appetites of their suitors and **(ii)** making the women more ready to surrender.

As for **(i)**: by raising the price of a place, we raise the price of conquering it and the desire to do so. May not Venus herself have cunningly raised the cost of her merchandise by making the laws pimp for her, knowing that it is an insipid pleasure unless it is given value by imagination and a high cost? . . . Cupid is a mischievous god; he makes it his sport to wrestle with piety and justice; glory for him means clashing his strength against all others' strength, all rules yielding to his. 'He is always hunting for occasions to do wrong.' [Ovid]

As for **(ii)**: Would we be cuckolded less often if we were less afraid of being so, according to women's character? For prohibition incites and invites them: 'What you want they don't: what you don't, they do' [Terence]; 'They are ashamed to go by the permitted way' [Lucan]. What better interpretation could we find for Messalina's conduct? At the start she cuckolded her husband in secret, as people do; but carrying on her affairs too easily because of his stupidity, she soon disdained that practice. Now see her make love openly, acknowledge her lovers, welcome them and grant her favours in sight of everyone. She wanted him to suffer from this. When that dull brute could not be aroused by all that, so her pleasures were made weak and insipid by the too-slack ease with which he seemed to permit and legitimise them, what did she do? Well, one day when her husband was out of the city, she—the consort of an Emperor alive and in good

health—married Silius, a man she had long since enjoyed, doing this at noon, in Rome the theatre of the world, with public pomp and festivity.

Doesn't it seem that either she was on her way to becoming chaste through her husband's nonchalance or else that she sought another husband who would stimulate her appetite by his jealousy ^[C] and excite her by standing up to her? ^[B] But the first trouble she had to face was also her last. That brute awoke with a start. One often does worse with these dozing dullards. I have found by experience that when this extreme tolerance comes apart, it produces the harshest vengeance, for in that case the anger and frenzy fuse into one and exxplode all their energy at the first attack. . . . He put her to death, together with a large number of those who were in complicity with her, even including ones who had had no choice and had been 'invited' to her bed with scourges.

·THOUGHTS ON LITERARY STYLE·

[There now begins the first of two long asides on writing. The essay's main topic, sex, will be resumed on page 53. After quoting some lines of Lucretius about love-making between Venus and Mars—lines that he seems to prefer to Virgil's (page 37) about Venus and Vulcan—Montaigne approvingly mentions a dozen Latin words/phrases that occur in one or both passages, and goes on to say that when he thinks about those words] I feel contempt for those little conceits and verbal tricks that have sprung up since. Those fine poets had no need for sharp and subtle word-play; their language is copious, full of a natural and constant power. They are all epigram—not only the tail but the head, stomach, and feet. There is nothing forced, nothing dragging; the whole thing moves at the same pace. ^[C] 'The texture of their work is manly; they are not concerned with little purple passages' [Seneca] ^[B] This is not a soft and merely inoffensive

eloquence; it is sinewy and solid, and it does not so much •please •the reader• as •fill and •ravish •him•; and it ravishes the strongest minds most. When I see these brave forms of expression—so full of life, so profound—I do not say that it is well *said*, I say that it is well *thought*. It is the liveliness of the imagination that fills the words and makes them soar: ^[C] 'The heart makes the man eloquent' [Quintilian]. ^[B] People these days call language 'judgement', and regard fine words as 'rich conceptions'.

This painting—I mean the kind of writing I have been praising in the ancients—is the result not so much of manual dexterity as of having the subject more vividly stamped on the soul. Gallus speaks simply because he conceives simply. Horace is not satisfied with a superficial expression; that would let him down. He sees more clearly and deeply into the thing; to express itself, his mind unlocks and ransacks the whole warehouse of words and figures of speech; as his concepts surpass the ordinary, it is not ordinary words that he needs. Plutarch says that he sees the Latin •language through •things. The same applies here: the sense illuminates and brings out the words, which are no longer wind but flesh and bone. ^[C] They mean more than they say. ^[B] Even weak-minded folk have some notion of this; for when I was in Italy I said whatever I pleased in everyday conversation, but for serious purposes I would not have dared to entrust myself to an idiom that I could neither bend nor turn out of its ordinary course. I want to do something of my own with it.

What enriches a language is its being handled and exploited by fine minds—not by making innovations as much as by expanding it through more vigorous and varied applications, by extending it and deploying it. They do not bring •new• words to it, but they enrich the words they use, giving more weight and depth to their meaning and use; they teach

the language unaccustomed rhythms, but prudently and shrewdly.

And how far this ability is from being given to everyone is seen in many of the French authors of our time. They are bold and proud enough not to follow the common road; but their lack of invention and discretion ruins them. All there is to be seen in them is a wretched affectation of originality, cold and absurd disguises, which instead of elevating their subject push it down. Provided they strut in their novelty, they care nothing about effectiveness. To seize on some new word they abandon the ordinary one, which is often stronger and more sinewy.

In our language I find plenty of stuff but a little lack of tailoring. There is no limit to what could be done with our jargon of hunting and warfare, which is a fruitful field for borrowing; and forms of speech, like seedlings, are made better and stronger by being transplanted. I find it—i.e. the jargon just mentioned—sufficiently abundant but not sufficiently tractable and vigorous. It usually succumbs under a powerful conception. If your pace is tense, you often feel that it is growing limp and giving way under you, and that when it fails, Latin comes to your aid, as Greek does to the aid of others.

Of some of the words I have just selected¹ it is hard for us to perceive the power, because use has somewhat cheapened their grace, and familiarity has made them commonplace. So too in our vulgar tongue there are some excellent phrases and metaphors whose beauty is fading with age, their colour tarnished by too frequent handling. But by that takes away none of their savour for those who have a good nose; nor does it detract from the glory of those ancient authors who were (as is likely) the first to shed this lustre on those words.

Scholarship treats things too subtly, in a style too artificial and different from the common and natural one. . . . I cannot recognise most of my ordinary emotions in Aristotle: they have been covered over and clad in a different gown for use by the schoolmen. God grant that are doing the right thing! If I were in that trade, just as they make nature artificial, I would make art natural. . . .

·INFLUENCES ON MY WRITING·

When I am writing, I can well do without the company and memory of my books, for fear they may interfere with my style. And also (to tell the truth) because the good authors humble me and dishearten me too much. I am inclined to do the trick of that painter who, after painting a wretched picture of some cocks, forbade his apprentices to let any natural cock enter his workshop. [C] And to give myself a little lustre I would need to adopt the device of the musician Antinonides who, when he had to perform, arranged that either before him or after him his audience should have their fill of some bad singers.

[B] But it is harder for me to do without Plutarch. He is so universal and so full that on all occasions, no matter how wild the subject you have chosen, he makes his way into your work and offers you a liberal hand, inexhaustible in riches and embellishments. It vexes me that those who hang around *him* are apt to pillage *me*. [C] I cannot be with him even a little time without taking out of the bowl a drumstick or a wing.

[B] For this project of mine it suits me to do my writing at home, deep in the country, where nobody can help or correct me and where I usually spend no time with any man who understands the the Latin of his Paternoster, let alone ·proper· French. I would have done it better somewhere

¹ [In the passage reported on, but not included, a page back.]

else, but the work would have been less *mine*; and its main goal and perfection is to be precisely mine. I would indeed correct an **accidental** error; I am full of them, since I run on carelessly. But to remove the imperfections that are **ordinary and constant** in me would be treachery.

When it is said to me, or I say to myself:

- ‘Your figures of speech are sown too densely’,
- ‘That’s a word of Gascon vintage’,
- ‘That’s a bad phrase’,
- ‘This is ignorant reasoning’,
- ‘This is paradoxical reasoning’,
- ‘This one is too mad’,
- ^[C]‘You are often playful; people will think that you are serious when you are only pretending’;¹

^[B] I reply ‘Yes, but I correct only the faults of **carelessness**, not those of **habit**. Don’t I always talk like that? Am I not portraying myself to the life? Enough then! I have done what I wanted: everyone recognises me in my book, and my book in me.’

Now, I have tendency to ape and to imitate; when I used to dabble in writing verse—I wrote it exclusively in Latin—it clearly revealed the poet I had just been reading; and some of my first essays smell a bit foreign. ^[C] In Paris I speak a language somewhat different from ‘the one I speak’ at Montaigne. ^[B] Anyone I look at with attention easily stamps something of himself. Whatever I contemplate I usurp: a silly expression, a nasty grimace, a ridiculous turn of speech. Faults even more so: once they prick me, they cling to me and will not leave me unless shaken off; I have more often been heard swearing from imitation than from my nature. . . .

I so easily receive these superficial impressions without

thinking of them that when I have had ‘Sire’ or ‘highness’ on my lips for three days in a row, those terms slip out a week later instead of ‘excellency’ or ‘lord’. And something I have said in jest I will say the following day seriously. That is why I am reluctant to write on well-worn topics, for fear of treating them at someone else’s expense. All topics are equally fertile for me. A fly will serve my purpose. (God grant that the topic I now have in hand was not taken up at the command of a will as light ·as a fly’s·!) Let me begin with any subject I please, for all subjects are linked to one another.

But my soul displeases me by ordinarily coming up with its deepest and maddest fancies, the ones I like best, quite unexpectedly and when I am least on the lookout for them. Then they quickly vanish away because just then there’s nothing to attach them to—on horseback, at table, in bed—but especially on horseback, the seat of my widest musings. When speaking, I have a fastidious zeal for attention and silence if I am in earnest; anyone who interrupts me stops me dead. On journeys the very exigencies of the roads cut down conversations; besides, I most often journey without the proper company for sustained conversation, which frees me to think my own thoughts.

It turns out as with my dreams; during them I commend them to my memory (for I often dream I am dreaming); but the next day I recall their colouring as it was—whether they were playful or sad or weird—but as for all the rest, the more I strain to find it the more I bury it in forgetfulness. Similarly with those chance reflections that drop into my mind: all that remains of them in my memory is an empty image, just enough to make me gnaw irritably away, uselessly seeking them.

¹ [Montaigne inserts after the third item in that list: ‘I do not avoid any ·phrases· that are used in the streets of France; those who try to fight usage with grammar make fools of themselves.’]

·SEXUAL LOVE AND HUMANITY·

Well now, setting books aside and speaking more directly and simply, I find after all that ·sexual· love is nothing but the thirst for the enjoyment of that pleasure ^[C] within a desired object, and that Venus is nothing but the pleasure of unloading our balls, analogous to the pleasure nature gives us when we are unloading other organs of ours; a pleasure that becomes wrong when it is enjoyed either excessively or indiscreetly. . . .

^[B] And considering as I often do

- the ridiculous titillation of this pleasure,
- the absurd, mindless, giddy emotions it stirs up in Zeno and Cratippus,
- that reckless frenzy,
- that face inflamed with fury and cruelty in the sweetest act of love, followed by
- that grave, severe, ecstatic countenance in so silly an activity,
- ^[C] the fact that our delights and our excrements have been lodged together pell-mell,¹
- ^[B] and that the highest pleasure is attended, like pain, with faintness and moaning,

I believe ^[C] that what Plato says is true: ^[B] Man is the plaything of the gods. . . .and that it was in mockery that nature bequeathed us this, the most confusing of our actions, to be the most common; so as to make us all equal, bringing to the same level the mad and the wise, men and beasts. . . .

We eat and drink as the beasts do, but those activities do not hamper the workings of our soul. So in them we keep our superiority over the beasts. But this ·activity of sexual intercourse· pushes every other thought under the yoke; by its imperious authority it makes a brute and a beast of all

the theology and philosophy there is in Plato; yet he does not complain of it. In everything else you can maintain some decorum; all other activities come under the rules of decency; ·but· this one cannot even be *imagined* except as flawed or ridiculous. To see this, try to find a wise and discreet way of doing it! Alexander used to say that he recognised himself as mortal chiefly by this activity and by sleep. Sleep stifles and suppresses the faculties of our soul; the sexual act likewise absorbs and disperses them. Truly it is a mark not only of our original corruption but also of our inanity and ugliness.

On the one hand Nature pushes us to it, having attached to this desire the most noble, useful and agreeable of its labours, ·namely begetting children·; on the other hand it lets us condemn and shun it as shameless and indecent, blush at it, and recommend abstinence. ^[C] Are we not then beasts to describe as ‘bestial’ the labour that makes us?

^[B] In their religions all nations are alike in •many conventions—sacrifices, lights, incense, fasts, offering—and among other things in •the condemnation of this act. All their opinions tend that way, not to mention the widespread practice of cutting off the foreskin ^[C] which is a punishment for it. ^[B] Perhaps we are right •to blame ourselves for making such a stupid production as man, •to call shameful the act and the parts that are used in it. ^[C] (Mine are now truly shameful and pitiful.)

The Essenes, of whom Pliny speaks, were maintained for several centuries without nurses or baby-clothes by the influx of foreigners who. . . .continually joined them. An entire nation risked self-extermination rather than engage in women’s embraces, forfeiting the continuation of mankind rather than create a man. They say that Zeno lay with a woman only once in his entire life; and that that was out of

¹ [The preparer of this version cannot resist the temptation to quote here W. B.] Yeats: ‘Love has pitched his mansion in the place of excrement.’]

civility, so as not to seem to have too stubborn a contempt for that sex.

[B] No man likes to be in on a birth: all men rush to be in on a death. [C] For someone's destruction, we choose an open field in broad daylight; for his construction, we hide in a dark little hollow. [B] It is a duty to hide and blush when making him; it is a glory and a source of many virtues to be able to unmake him. One is an offence, the other an act of grace. . . . The Athenians, to put the disgrace of those two activities on the same level, when they had to purify the island of Delos and justify themselves to Apollo, forbade all burial and all birth within its territory. 'We are ashamed of our very selves' [Terence]. . . .

[B] There are nations which cover themselves when eating. I know a lady (one of the greatest) who shares this opinion that chewing is a disagreeable grimace that takes away much of women's grace and beauty, and does not like to appear in public with an appetite. And I know a man who cannot bear to see anyone eat or to be seen eating. He avoids company when he is filling himself more than when he is emptying himself.

·AGAINST SELF-ABASEMENT·

In the empire of the Turk are found many men who, to outdo others, •never allow themselves to be seen eating a meal; who •eat only one meal a week, [C] who •cut and mangle their faces and limbs, who •never talk to anyone; all of them people who •think they are honouring their nature by denaturing themselves, who •pride themselves on their contempt,¹ who •think to• make themselves better by making themselves worse.

[B] What a monstrous animal, to be a horror to himself, [C] to whom his pleasures are a burden, and who clings to mis-

fortune! [B] There are some who hide their existence—'They give up their homes and domestic delights to go into exile' [Virgil]—hiding from the sight of other men; who avoid health and cheerfulness as hostile and harmful qualities. Not only several sects but several *nations* curse their birth and bless their death. [C] And there are some where the sun is hated and darkness worshipped.

[B] We are ingenious only in maltreating ourselves; that is the true quarry of the power of our mind—[C] a dangerous tool when out of control. [B] 'O pitiful men, who hold their joys a crime' [Maximianus].

Alas, poor man! You have enough inevitable misfortunes without increasing them by inventing others; your condition is wretched enough already without making it artificially so. You have enough uglinesses that are real and intrinsic to you without fabricating imaginary ones. [C] Do you find that you are too much at your ease unless your ease gives you displeasure? [B] Do you find that you have already fulfilled all the necessary duties that nature requires of you, and that nature is lacking and idle within you unless you bind yourself to new ones? You are not afraid to infringe nature's universal and undoubted laws, but you preen yourself on your own sectarian and imaginary ones; and the more particular, uncertain and controverted they are, the more effort you put into them. [C] The arbitrary rules of your own invention and the rules of your parish engross you and bind you; those of God and the world do not touch you. [B] Just run through a few examples that assertion; your life is made up of them.

·SEXUAL PURSUIT·

The lines of those two poets—Virgil and Lucretius—[see page 50]—treating sexual pleasure as they do with reserve and discretion, seem to me to reveal it and throw a closer

¹ [The French is *qui se prisent de leur mespris*; this has a verbal-overlap-within-a-contrast, which the present English version does not capture.]

light on it. The ladies cover their bosom with a veil, as do priests with many sacred objects; painters put shadows in their work to bring out the light more; and it is said that the sun and wind beat down harder when deflected than when direct. When the Egyptian was asked 'What are you carrying there, hidden under your cloak?', he gave a wise reply: 'It is hidden under my cloak so that you won't know what it is.' But some things are hidden in order to reveal them more.

Listen to this man, who is more open: 'And pressed her naked body against mine' [Ovid]. I can feel him gelding me! Let Martial pull up Venus's skirts as high as he likes; he does not succeed in revealing her as completely as that. He who says everything gluts us and disgusts us; one who is timid about expressing himself leads us on to think more than is there. There is treachery in that sort of modesty; especially when, as they do, they half-open such a beautiful highway for our imagination. Both that act and its portrayal should savour of theft.

I like the love-making of Spaniards and Italians, which is more respectful and timid, more mannered and less open.

(In ancient times someone or other wished his throat was as long a crane's neck so as to have more time to taste what he was swallowing. That wish is more appropriate in this hasty and headlong pleasure, especially for natures such as mine, for I have the failing of being too sudden.)

For them, to arrest its flight and prolong it on preliminaries, everything serves as a grace and reward: a glance, a bow, a word, a sign.

If a man could dine off the steam of a roast, wouldn't that be a fine saving? This is a passion that mingles very little essential solids with plenty of vanity and feverish dreams; it

should be rewarded and treated accordingly. Let us teach the ladies to make the most of themselves, to respect themselves, to beguile and fool us. We make our last attack the first one; the French impetuosity is always there. If the ladies string out their favours, offering them retail, then each man, according to his worth and merit, will find there some little scrap of pleasure, even in miserable old age.

He who has enjoyment only in enjoyment,¹ who must win all or nothing, who loves the chase only for the capture, has no business mixing with our sect. The more steps and degrees there are, the more height and honour there is in the topmost seat. We should take pleasure in being led there, as is done in splendid palaces, by varied portals and corridors, long and pleasant galleries, and many windings. This arrangement would turn to our advantage; stay there longer and love there longer; without hope and without desire we no longer achieve anything worthwhile.

Our mastery and entire possession is something for them to fear infinitely. Once they have wholly surrendered to the mercy of our faith and constancy, their position is hazardous. Those virtues are rare and exacting; as soon as we have them [i.e. the women], they no longer have us: 'As soon as eager longing is satisfied, our minds fear not for their pledged word nor care about perjury' [Catullus].

[C] A young Greek called Thrasonides was so in love with love that, having won his lady's heart, he refused to enjoy her so as not to weaken, glut and deaden by enjoyment that restless ardour that he gloried in and fed on.

[B] Food tastes better when it is expensive. Think how far kisses, the form of greeting peculiar to our nation, have had their grace cheapened by availability; Socrates says they are most powerful and dangerous for stealing our hearts. Ours

¹ [Meaning: 'He whose pleasure in sexual matters is confined to actual copulation'.]

is an unpleasant custom which wrongs the ladies who have to lend their lips to any man, however ugly, who comes with three footmen in his train: 'A bluish ice, from nostrils like a dog's, hangs down and bedews his beard. I would a hundred times rather kiss his behind' [Martial]. And we ourselves gain little from it; for as the world is divided, for three beautiful women we have to kiss fifty ugly ones. And for a tender stomach such as men of my age have, one bad kiss is too high a price for one good one.

In Italy they play the swooning suitor even with women who are for sale. They defend themselves thus: there are degrees in enjoying a woman; by such courtship they want to obtain for themselves the fullest enjoyment of all. Such women sell only their bodies; their wills cannot be up for sale: they are too free, too autonomous. It is her will that the Italians are after, they say. And they are right. What must be courted and ensnared is the will. I am horrified by the thought of a body given to me but lacking love. [He goes on with a page of examples, ancient and modern, illustrating this theme. Then:]

·WOMEN IN ITALY·

Those who know Italy will never find it strange if for this subject I do not seek examples elsewhere; for that nation may be called the teacher of the rest of the world in this matter. They generally have more beautiful women than we do and fewer ugly ones, though for rare and outstanding beauties I think we are on a par. And I think the same applies to intellects; they have more ordinarily good ones than we do, and it is obvious that brutish stupidity is incomparably more rare there than here. But in matchless minds, those of the highest rank, we concede nothing to them. If I had to extend this comparison to *valour*, it would seem to me

that the situation could now be said to be reversed: valour is more common and natural with us than with them; but we sometimes see it so full and vigorous in their hands that it surpasses the sturdiest examples of it that we have.

Marriages in that country are crippled in this: their custom commonly imposes such a harsh and slavish law on the wives that the slightest acquaintance with another man is as severe¹ an offence as the most intimate. The result of this law is that all approaches to the wives necessarily become substantial; and since whatever they do amounts to the same, the choice is made for them already. [C] And once they have broken through these partitions, believe me, they are on fire: 'Lust then breaks loose, like a wild beast first angered by its chains and then set free' [Livy]. [B] They ought to be given a little more rein: 'I recently saw a horse, straining at the bit, pulling with its mouth and running like lightning' [Ovid]. The desire for company is weakened by giving it a little freedom.

We run more or less equal risks. They are excessive in restraint, we in freedom. It is a fine practice of our nation that our sons are received into good families to be educated and brought up as pages, as in a school for nobility. . . . There are as many styles and forms as there are homes; and I have noticed that ladies who have tried to impose the most austere rules on the girls in their entourage have not produced any better results. There should be moderation; a good part of their conduct should be left to their own discretion; for, one way or another, no discipline can curb them in all directions. But it is quite true that a girl who has escaped, bag and baggage, from a free schooling, inspires much more confidence than one who emerges soberly from an austere prison of a school.

¹ [The French is *capitale*, but Montaigne probably didn't mean that literally.]

[Two short paragraphs—with four bits ^[B]-tagged and three ^[C]-tagged—that make an unilluminating and untidy transition from what has gone before to what comes next:]

·DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE SEXES·

I commend gradation and delay in the dispensation of their favours. ^[C] Plato shows that in every kind of love the defenders are forbidden to be easy and quick. ^[B] To surrender completely in such a heedless and impetuous way is a sign of voracity, which they should hide with all their art. By acting in an orderly and measured way when distributing their gifts, they beguile our desire much better and hide their own. Let them always flee before us—I mean even those who intend to be caught: they conquer us best when retreating, like the Scythians. Indeed, by the law that nature gives them, it is not for them to will and desire; their role is to endure, obey, consent. That is why nature has given them an unfailing capacity ·to play this role·, a capacity that *we* have only rarely and unreliably. The time is always right for them, so that they will be always ready when our time comes: ‘they are born to be passive’ [Seneca]. And whereas nature has so arranged it that *our* appetites should show and declare themselves prominently, it has made *theirs* hidden and internal, providing them with organs ^[C] unsuited to making a display and ^[B] strictly defensive.

[A ^[C]-tagged anecdote about Alexander’s mating with a queen of the Amazons. Then:] ^[B] In virtually everything we are unjust judges of their actions, as they are of ours. I admit the truth when it goes against me, just as when it serves me. It is an ugly disorder that drives them to change so frequently and impedes them from settling their affections firmly on anyone whatsoever; as we see in that goddess ·Venus· to whom are attributed so many changes and so many lovers. Yet the truth is that it is contrary to the nature of love not

to be violent, and contrary to the nature of violence to be constant. Those who are astonished by this, who denounce and seek the causes of this female malady which they find unnatural and incredible, why don’t they see how often they accept it in themselves without being appalled and calling it a miracle? It would perhaps be more strange to find any stability in it. It is not a passion of the body alone. Just as there is no end to greed and ambition, so there is no end to debauchery. It still lives on after satiety; it can’t be supplied with any lasting satisfaction, any goal; it always proceeds beyond possession.

·MALE IMPOTENCE·

And fickleness is perhaps somewhat more excusable in them than in us. Like us they can cite in their defence the penchant we both have for variety and novelty; secondly they can cite, what we cannot, that they buy a pig in a poke;

^[C] (Queen Joanna of Naples caused her first husband Andreosso to be strangled at the bars of her window by a gold and silver cord, plaited by her own hands, once she discovered that neither his organs nor his potency corresponded to the hopes she had conceived of his matrimonial duties from his stature, his beauty, his youth and his disposition, by which he had won her and deceived her);

^[B] they can also cite this: since the active partner is required to make more effort than the passive one, we sometimes cannot provide for this necessity, whereas they always can.

^[C] That is why Plato wisely established in his laws that those making a judgement on the suitability of a marriage should see the youths who aspired to it stark naked but the maidens naked only down to the girdle. ^[B] When they come to try us, they may perhaps find us not worthy of their choice: ‘She deserts his impotent bed after exploring his thighs and

his penis which, like a wet thong, refuses an erection to her exhausted hand' [Martial]. It is not enough that the will drives straight. Impotence and an inability to consummate legitimately annul a marriage: 'And seeks a more vigorous lover, to unseal her virgin zone' [Catullus]. . . .

But is it not a great impudence to bring our imperfections and weaknesses to a place where we want to please and leave a good reputation and good impression of ourselves? For the little that I need nowadays —'Limp, for a single encounter' [Horace]—I would not want to be a nuisance to a person whom I should revere and fear: 'Do not fear a man whose life, alas, has staggered past its fiftieth year' [Horace].

Nature should have been satisfied with making that age miserable, without also making it ridiculous. I hate to see it—on the strength of an inch of paltry vigour that heats it up three times a week—bustle about and swagger with the same vehemence as if it had a good day's legitimate work under its belt. Straw on fire!¹ [C] And I marvel when such a lively and frisky flame is quickly quenched and frozen cold. That appetite should belong only to the flower of beautiful youth. [B] If you want to find out, try relying on old age to further that tireless, full, constant and great-souled ardour that is in you; it will leave you stranded along the way! . . .

Any man who can without dying of shame await the morning that brings disdain from those lovely eyes that have witnessed his limpness and irrelevance—'Though silent, her features are eloquent with loud reproach' [Ovid]—has never known the happy pride of having conquered them and dimmed them by the vigorous exercise of a busy and active night. When I have seen one of them become weary of me, I have not promptly blamed her fickleness; I have

wondered whether I did not have reason rather to blame nature. Certainly it has treated me unfairly and unkindly, . . . [C] and inflicted the most enormous injury. Each of my parts makes me myself as much as does any other part; and none makes me more properly a man than this one.

[A messy [C]-tagged page that starts 'I owe to the public my portrait complete.' That echoes material begun on page 34, and also suggests that Montaigne—before getting side-tracked into a jumble of attacks on superficiality and mere politeness, and into some indecencies—was clearing his throat preparatory to the summing-up pages of this essay:]

·THE PLACE OF SEX IN MY LIFE·

[C] I like modesty. It is not by judgement that I have chosen this scandalous way of speaking; it's nature that chose it for me. I do not commend it, any more than I do any forms that are contrary to accepted practice; but I defend it, lessening the indictment by citing individual and general considerations. Let us get on.

Likewise,² [B] what basis can there be for that sovereign authority you assume over women who grant you their favours at their own expense, . . . so that you immediately invest yourselves with rights, cold disapproval and husbandly authority? It is a covenant freely entered into; why do you not stick to it if you want to hold them to it? [C] Voluntary agreements grant no prescriptive rights.

[B] It is contrary to the ·usual· form, but nevertheless true that in my day I handled this business (as far as its nature allows) as conscientiously as any other, and with a sort of justice; I did not show more affection to them than I felt, and portrayed to them, without decoration, my affection's decline,

¹ [Allusion to the proverb 'A whore's love is but straw on fire'.]

² *Pareillement*. It is not clear what the link is meant to be here; perhaps to the 'try relying on old age' passage a few paragraphs back.

its flourishing period and its birth, its fits and relapses. One does not always go about it at the same pace. I was so sparing with promises that I think I kept more than I ever vowed or owed. They found fidelity there, even to the extent of my serving their inconstancy—and I mean inconstancy admitted and at times repeated. I never broke with one of them as long as I was held there even by the tail-end of a thread. And no matter what occasions they gave me, I never broke with them to the point of scorn or hatred; for such intimacies, even when acquired on the most shameful terms, still oblige me to some good will.

I did sometimes show anger and somewhat heedless impatience over their ruses and evasions and our quarrels; for I am by nature subject to sudden emotions that are often harmful to my affairs, though they are slight and brief. If they wanted to test my freedom of judgement, I did not shirk giving them sharp paternal advice and pinching them where they smarted. If I left them any room to complain of me, it is rather for having found in me a love which by modern standards was stupidly conscientious. I kept my word in cases where I could easily have been excused; back then, women sometimes surrendered while saving their reputations, on conditions that they readily allowed their conqueror to break. More than once, in the interests of their honour, I have made my pleasure cool at the point of climax; and, when reason urged me, I have armed them against myself, so that they acted more safely and soberly by my rules, when they freely relied on them, than they would have done by their own.

^[C] As far as I could, I personally assumed all the risks of our assignations so as to take the load off them; and I always arranged our meetings in the hardest and most unexpected ways, for they are the least open to suspicion. . . . It is easy to dare what nobody thinks you will dare, which is made easy

by its difficulty.

^[B] Never were a man's approaches more friskily genital than mine were. This way of loving is more in harmony with the rules; but how ridiculous it is to people today, and how unsuccessful, who knows better than I? Yet I shall not be led to regret it; I have nothing more to lose there: 'As is shown by my votive tablet, I have hung up my dripping garments on the temple wall and dedicated them to the god of the sea' [Horace]. It is time now to talk of this openly. But—just as I might say to someone 'My friend, you are dreaming; love in this time of yours has nothing to do with faith and probity: "If you try to reduce all this to rational rules you will simply give yourself the task of going rationally insane"' [Terence]

—so in reverse if it were for *me* to start again, I would certainly adopt the same course and the same method, however fruitless it might be for me. ^[C] Incompetence and stupidity are praiseworthy in an activity that deserves no praise. ^[B] The further I go from twomens' attitude in this, the nearer I draw to my own.

I never threw myself completely into this business. I took pleasure in it, but did not forget myself. I kept intact the little sense and discretion nature has given me, in their interests and in mine: a little excitement but no madness. My conscience was compromised by it through lasciviousness and licentiousness, but not through ingratitude, treachery, malignity or cruelty. I did not purchase the pleasures of this vice at all costs, but was contented to pay its proper and simple cost. . . .

I hate almost equally •a stagnant and sleepy idleness and •a prickly and painful bustle. One pinches me, the other puts me to sleep; and I am no more fond of cuts than of bruises, of slashing blows than of blunt ones. When I was more fit for this business I found in it a just moderation between

those two extremes. Love is a lively emotion, light-hearted and alert; I was neither confused nor afflicted by it, but I was heated by it and *alteré* [= 'changed, somewhat for the worse']. That's the place to stop: only fools let it harm them.

When a youth asked the philosopher Panaetius whether it would be all right for a wise man to be in love, he replied: 'Let us leave aside the wise; but you and I, who are not, should not get involved in something so violent and disturbing, which enslaves us to others and makes us contemptible to ourselves.' He was right that something intrinsically so precipitous should not be entrusted to a soul that lacks the wherewithal to withstand its assaults and to act in ways that refute Agesilaus's assertion that wisdom and love cannot coexist.

It is indeed a vain pastime—unbecoming, shameful, and wrong—but I reckon that when it is carried on in this fashion ·of mine· it is healthy, appropriate for enlivening a sluggish mind and body. If I were a physician I would order it for a man of my temperament and condition, as readily as any other prescription, so as to liven him up and keep him in trim until he is well on in years, and to keep him from the clutches of old age. While we are only in its outskirts, and the pulse still beats—'While the hair is but newly grey, while old age is still fresh and erect, while there is still some thread for Lachesis to spin, while I can stand on my own feet without leaning on a stick' [Juvenal]—we need to be stirred and thrilled by some such biting agitation as this. See how much youth, vigour and gaiety it restored to wise Anacreon. . . .

Philosophy does not do battle against natural pleasures, provided that temperance accompanies them; ^[C] it preaches moderation in them, not avoidance; ^[B] its forces are marshalled against bastard and unnatural pleasures. It says that bodily appetites ought not to be augmented by the mind, and ingeniously warns us. . . . to avoid food and drink that

make us hungry and thirsty; ^[B] as in the service of love it orders us to take an object that simply satisfies the body's need and does not stir the soul, which should not make love its concern, but barely follow along accompanying the body.

But am I not right to think that these precepts—which are in my view nevertheless a trifle rigorous—apply ·only· to a body that performs its function, and that for a run-down body (as for a weak stomach) it is permissible to warm it up and support it by art, and by means of the imagination to restore appetite and joy to it, since, left to itself, it has lost them?

May we not say that during this earthly imprisonment there is nothing in us either purely corporeal or purely spiritual, and that we do wrong to tear a living man apart? And that it seems reasonable that we should adopt towards the enjoyment of pleasure at least as favourable an attitude as we do towards pain? Pain for example was acute to the point of perfection in the souls of saints doing penance; the body naturally had a share in it because of their union; yet it could have had little part in the cause. But they [i.e. the saints] were by no means content that the body should 'barely follow along, accompanying' the afflicted soul; they afflicted horrifying and appropriate torments on it, so that the body and the soul, vying with each other, would plunge the whole man into pain, all the more salutary for its harshness.

^[C] In the parallel case of bodily pleasures, is it not unjust to cool the soul towards them and say that it should be dragged towards them as to some compelling obligation or some slavish need? It is for the soul, rather, to hatch them and foment them, and, since it has the governing authority, to come forward and welcome them. Just as in my opinion it is for the soul, in the pleasures that are its own, to inspire and infuse into the body all the feeling that their nature allows, and to work to make them sweet and salutary to it.

For it is, as they say, right that the body should never follow its appetites to the prejudice of the mind; so why is it not also right that the mind should not follow its appetites to the prejudice of the body?

^[B] I have absolutely no other passion ·but love· to keep me going. What avarice, ambition, quarrels, lawsuits do for men who, like me, have no assigned occupation, love would do more agreeably. It would

- restore to me vigilance, sober behaviour, graceful manners, care for my person;
- secure my countenance so that the distortions of old age—those deformed and pitiable distortions—should not come to disfigure it;
- take me back to healthy and wise activities by which I might make myself more esteemed and more loved, clearing my mind of despair about itself and about how it is used, and bringing it to know itself again;
- divert me from a thousand troublesome thoughts, from a thousand melancholy moods, which idleness and the poor state of our health burdens us with in old age;
- warm up, at least in dream, this blood ·of mine· which nature is abandoning; and
- lift up the chin and stretch out a little the muscles (and the soul's vigour and exhilaration) for this poor man who is marching steadily towards his ruin.¹

But I quite understand that love is a very hard commodity to recover. Through weakness and long experience, our tastes have become more delicate and discriminating. We ask for more when we bring less; we want the maximum of choice just when we least deserve to find favour. Knowing ourselves for what we are, we are less bold and more distrustful;

knowing our own circumstances—and theirs—nothing can assure us that we are loved. [[Here 'theirs' evidently refers to 'the circumstances' of any woman we might court.]]

I feel shame for myself to be found among this green and ardent youth, 'in whose indomitable groin there is a tendon firmer than a young tree planted on the hillside' [Horace]. Why would we go presenting our wretchedness among this sprightliness? 'So that burning youth, not without many a laugh, may see our torch decayed into ashes' [Horace]. They have strength and reason on their side; let us make room for them; we can hold out no longer. ^[C] That sprig of budding beauty will not allow itself to be handled by such stiff hands or won over by purely material means. . . .

^[B] Now, this is a transaction that requires mutuality and reciprocity. We can acknowledge the other pleasures we receive by recompenses of various kinds; this one can be repaid only in the same kind of coin. ^[C] In this love game, indeed, the pleasure that I give stimulates my imagination more sweetly than the pleasure I receive. ^[B] There is no nobility in a man who can get pleasure when he is not giving any; it is a mean soul that wants only to *take*, gets pleasure from fostering relations with persons to whom he is a debtor. There is no beauty, grace, or intimacy so exquisite that a gentleman should want them at this price. If they can be kind to us only out of pity, I would much rather not live at all than live on alms. I would want to be entitled to ask them for kindness in the style I have seen beggars use in Italy: '*Fate ben per voi*' = 'Do yourself a good turn'; ^[C] or in the manner in which Cyrus exhorted his soldiers: 'He who loves himself, let him follow me.'

^[B] Someone will say to me: 'Go back again to women who are now in the same state as you are: fellowship in the same

¹ [This register of benefits includes four ^[C]-tagged bits.

misfortune will make them easier for you.’ Oh what a stupid and insipid compromise! ‘I have no desire to pluck hairs from a dead lion’s beard’ [Martial]. [C] One of the reproaches and accusations that Xenophon makes about Meno is that in his love-affairs he concerns himself only with partners past their bloom. I get more sexual pleasure from the mere sight of a young couple appropriately united in a tender embrace, or even from merely imagining it, than I would get from being the second partner in a sad misshapen union. [B] I leave that fanciful appetite to the Emperor Galba, who devoted himself only to tough and ancient flesh; and to this poor wretch¹: ‘O would the gods let me see you as you are, tenderly kiss your fading hair and clasp your withered body in my embrace!’

[C] And among the principal forms of ugliness I count all artificial and forced beauties. A young lad of Chio called Hemon, hoping that by fine clothes he could acquire the good looks that nature had deprived him of, came to the philosopher Arcesilaus and asked him if a wise man could ever find himself in love. ‘Oh yes,’ he replied, ‘but not with a dishonest dressed-up beauty such as yours.’ An ugly old age when openly avowed is in my opinion less old and less ugly than one smoothed out and painted over.

[B] Shall I say it, provided no-one takes me by the throat for it? Love never seems to me to be properly and naturally in season except in the age next to childhood: ‘A youth such that, if you put him among a band of maidens, a thousand experts would fail to pick him out, with his flowing hair and his sexually indeterminate face.’ [Horace]. . . . I find love already out of place in adult manhood. Let alone in old age: ‘For Cupid disdainfully flies past the withered oak’ [Horace].

[C] And Queen Margaret of Navarre greatly extends the privileges of women, ordering that they exchange the title ‘beautiful’ for ‘good’ when they reach the age of 30.

[B] The shorter the possession we give Cupid over our lives, the more value we’ll get from him. Look at his bearing! He is a beardless boy. Who does not know how greatly everything is done contrary to good order in his sect? Study, exercises and experience are routes to failure; there the novices are in charge: ‘Love knows no order’ [Saint Jerome]. Certainly love has more *style* when it is mixed with heedlessness and confusion; mistakes and failures give it point and grace; provided it is sharp and hungry, it matters little whether it is prudent. See how Cupid stumbles along, tripping and playing the fool; to guide him by art and wisdom is to clamp him in the stocks; to lay those hairy calloused hands² on him is to constrain his divine freedom.

Moreover, I often hear women portray this relationship as wholly spiritual [see Glossary], and disdain to consider the interests that the senses have in it. Everything contributes to it; but I may say this:

I have often found that we excuse the weakness of their minds because of their bodily beauties, I have yet to see the beauty of a man’s mind, however mature and wise, lead a woman to come to the aid of a body that is slipping, however slightly, into decline.

Why is not one of them seized with a desire for that noble Socratic exchange of body for mind, [C] purchasing at the price of her thighs a philosophical and spiritual relationship—the highest price she could ever get for them?

Plato decrees in his *Laws* that anyone who has achieved some signal and useful exploit in war may not for the

¹ [Ovid, writing to his wife from whom he was separated by permanent exile on the command of the Emperor Augustus.]

² [That is, the ones implied by ‘Let alone in old age’, just before the most recent [C]-tag.]

duration of that conflict—regardless of his ugliness or his age—be refused a kiss or other amorous favour from anyone he wants it from. What he finds so just in commendation of military worth, may it not also be used to commend worth of another kind? And why is no one of them ever moved ^[B] to win before her sisters the glory of a love so chaste? And I do mean *chaste*: ‘When he comes to the struggle, he rages in vain, as a great fire does at times, without force, in the stubble’ [Virgil, writing about an old horse]. The vices that are stifled in thought are not the worst.

To bring to an end this notable commentary which has escaped me in a flow of babble—a flow sometimes impetuous and harmful [here eight barely relevant lines by Catullus]— ^[B] I say that males and females are cast in the same mould; apart from education and custom, the difference between them is not great. ^[C] In *The Republic* Plato even-handedly invites both to the fellowship of all studies, exercises, offices, warlike and peaceful vocations. And the philosopher Antisthenes eliminated any distinction between women’s virtue and our own. ^[B] It is much easier to accuse one sex than to excuse the other. As the saying goes: the pot jeers at the kettle.

6. Fear. Royal liberality. Conquistadors

[Bewilderingly, Montaigne gave this essay the title ‘Coaches’, which is relevant only on page 64. On page 73 he says ‘Let us return to our coaches’, but he doesn’t. For ‘Conquistador’ see glossary.]

^[B] It is very easy to prove that the great authors, when they write about causes, make use not only of those that they reckon to be true ·causes· but also those that they do not believe ·to be so·, provided they have some originality and beauty. They speak truly and usefully enough if they speak

ingeniously. We cannot be sure of the master cause, so we pile cause upon cause, hoping that it may happen to be among them: ‘Since it suffices not to give one single cause, many must be given, one of which only may be true’ [Lucetius].

You ask me: ‘What is the origin of our custom of saying “Bless you” when people sneeze?’ Well, we produce three sorts of wind: the one that comes from below is too foul; the one that issues through the mouth carries some reproach for gluttony; the third is sneezing. And because it comes from the head and is blameless, we give it this civil reception. Do not mock this piece of subtlety; it is, they say, from Aristotle.

·FEAR, ESPECIALLY FEAR OF DEATH·

It seems to me that I have read in Plutarch—who combined art with nature and judgement with knowledge better than any other author I know—the explanation that the heaving of the stomach that afflicts those who travel by sea arises from fear, having found some reason that shows that fear can produce such an effect. I am very subject to this trouble, and I *know* that fear is not the cause in my case; and I know it not by argument but by compelling experience. . . . Though many occasions for being afraid have arisen (if you count death as one), I have never felt, on water or anywhere else, fear that has confused or dazed me.

Fear sometimes arises from lack of judgement as well as from lack of courage. All the dangers I have seen I have seen with my eyes open, with my sight free, sound and whole; besides, it takes courage to be afraid. Once when I did have to flee, I managed my flight well and maintained more order than others did; my flight, ^[C] if not without fear, nevertheless ^[B] was without terror and without dismay; it was excited, but not dazed or distracted.

Great souls go far beyond that, showing us flights that are not merely composed and healthy but proud. Here let

me cite the one that Alcibiades relates, concerning Socrates, his companion in arms:

'I came across him after the rout of our army; he and Laches were among the last of the fugitives. I watched him at my leisure and in safety, for I was on a good horse and he on foot, which is how we had fought together. I noticed first how much presence of mind and resolve he showed, compared with Laches; next it was his confident walk, just like his usual one; his firm and steady gaze, considering and judging what was going on around him, looking now at some, now at others, friends and enemies, encouraging the friends and showing the others that he was a man to sell his life-blood very dear if anyone tried take it from him. That saved them, for men like that are not attacked; it's the fearful who are pursued.'

There you have the testimony of that great captain, teaching us (what we constantly experience for ourselves) that nothing casts us into dangers so much as an unthinking eagerness to keep clear of them: ^[C] 'Where there is less fear, there is generally less danger' [Livy].

^[B] Our common people are wrong to say of anyone 'He fears death', when they mean that he thinks about it and foresees it. Foresight is equally appropriate for anything that concerns us, for good or ill. Considering and judging the danger is in a way the *opposite* of being stunned by it.

I do not feel myself strong enough to sustain the impact and impetuosity of this passion of fear, or of any other intense passion. If I were once conquered and thrown by it, I would never get up again wholly intact. Anything that made my soul lose its footing would never set it back upright in its place; it examines and searches itself all too keenly and deeply, but would never allow the wound that had pierced it close up and heal. Fortunately for me, no illness has yet

laid it low. Each attack on me I confront and oppose in full armour; so the first to get the better of me would leave me without resources. I have no secondary defence; wherever the torrent breaches my dyke, I will be helpless and drowned for good.

^[C] Epicurus says that the wise man can never pass into a contrary state. I have an opinion about the reverse of this saying, namely that no man who has been a real fool once will ever be really wise.

^[B] God sends cold according to the garment, and sends me passions according to my means of sustaining them. Nature, having uncovered me on one flank, has covered me on the other; having disarmed me of strength, it has armed me with insensibility and controlled apprehensiveness.

Now I cannot endure coach, litter or boat for long (and found them even harder to put up with in my youth); and I hate any means of conveyance other than horseback, both in the town and in the country. But I can tolerate a litter less than a coach; and for the same reason I can better tolerate being thrown about on a rough sea—which produces fear—than I can the motion experienced during calm weather. By that slight jolt made by the oars as they pull the boat from under us I somehow feel my head and stomach disturbed, just as I cannot bear a rickety chair under me. When sail or current bears us smoothly along or when we are towed, this uniform motion does not trouble me in the least. It is interrupted motion that upsets me, the more so when it is slow. I cannot describe the characteristics of this trouble in any other way. Doctors have told me to bind a towel as a compress around the lower part of my belly; I have never tried this, being accustomed to wrestle with my weaknesses and overcome them by myself.

·VARIOUS USES OF COACHES·

[C] If my memory of them were adequately furnished, I would not regret time spent listing here the infinite variety of historical examples of the use of coaches in the service of war, varying from one nation to another and from one century to another; they are, it seems to me, most effective and very necessary, so that it's a wonder that we don't use them any more.¹ I will merely say this: quite recently (in our fathers' time) the Hungarians put them to excellent use against the Turks; in each coach they had a lancer and a musketeer, together with a number of harquebuses in racks, loaded and ready, the whole thing covered with a wall of shields, like a frigate. They formed their battlefront of three thousand such coaches; after the cannon had played their part, they •had them advance and made the enemy swallow this salvo as a foretaste of what was to come (no slight advantage!), or else they •launched them into the enemy squadrons to break them and open them up. In addition to which they got help from them by using them •to cover the flanks of their troops marching through open country where they were vulnerable or •to provide speedy defence of an encampment, turning it into a fort.

In my own day a gentleman on one of our frontiers, who was very unwieldy of person and found no horse able to bear his weight, was involved in a feud and went about the countryside in a coach of this very description, and made out very well. But let us leave these war-coaches.

The kings of our first dynasty used to travel the land in a chariot drawn by four •oxen. [B] Mark Antony was the first to have himself drawn through Rome—with a minstrel-girl beside him—by •lions harnessed to a coach. Heliogabalus

later did the same, calling himself Cybele, the mother of the gods; and also, drawn by •tigers, he pretended to be the god Bacchus. On other occasions he harnessed two •stags to his coach; once it was four •dogs; another time he stripped naked and was drawn in solemn procession by four naked •girls. The Emperor Firmus had his coach drawn by enormous •ostriches; making it seem to fly rather than roll.

·POINTLESS DISPLAY·

The strangeness of these contrivances puts a certain idea into my head, namely that when monarchs work at showing off and making a display through excessive expenditure, this is a kind of timidity, a sign of their not having enough sense of what they are. This would be excusable when the monarch was in a foreign land; but among his subjects, where he is all-powerful, his rank gives him the highest degree of honour he can attain. Similarly it seems to me that it is superfluous for a gentleman to dress with studied care at home; his house, his servants, his cuisine are enough to vouch for him there.

[C] Isocrates' advice to his king seems to me reasonable: let his furniture and his tableware be magnificent, for such expenditure is of lasting value and is passed on to his successors; let him avoid all displays that immediately flow away out of use and memory.

[B] When I was a young man, lacking other adornments I liked to adorn myself in fine clothes, and they suited me well; there are folk on whom fine clothes weep.

·AGAINST PARADES AND FESTIVALS·

We have amazing stories about our kings' frugality over both personal expenditure and donations—kings great in

¹ [All previous translations have 'that we have lost all knowledge of them', but Montaigne clearly *hasn't* lost all knowledge of them. The present version takes '*en . . . connoissance*' to mean 'acquaintance with them' rather than 'knowledge of them'.]

reputation, in valour, and in fortune. Demosthenes fights tooth and nail against his city's law allotting public money to lavish games and feasts. He wanted their greatness to be displayed in the number of its well-armed fighting-ships and in good, well-equipped armies.

[C] Theophrastus is rightly condemned for asserting the opposite doctrine in his book on riches, in which he maintained that expenditure on festivals is the true fruit of opulence. These are pleasures, says Aristotle, •that touch only the lowest of the common people, •that vanish from memory as soon as people are sated with them, and •that no serious man of judgement can esteem.

The outlay would seem to me to be more royal—as well as more useful, just, and durable—if spent on •ports, harbours, fortifications and walls, on •splendid buildings, •on churches, hospitals and colleges, and •on improving streets and highways. In my time, Pope Gregory XIII left a favourable reputation behind him by so doing; and, by so doing, our own Queen Catherine would for many years leave evidence of her natural generosity and munificence [see Glossary], if her means were sufficient for her desires. Fortune has deeply distressed me by interrupting the construction of the handsome new bridge in our great city, depriving me of the hope of seeing it in regular use before I die.¹

[B] Moreover, to the subjects who are spectators of these triumphs it seems that their own wealth is being flaunted and that they are being entertained at their own expense. Kings' subjects are apt to assume about the kings what we assume about our servants: that they should provide abundantly for everything we want, without laying a finger on it for themselves. That is why the Emperor Galba, having enjoyed •the playing of• a musician during dinner, called

for his chest, plunged in his hand and gave him a fistful of crowns saying 'This is not public money; it is my own.' At all events, the people are usually right: their eyes are feasted with what should go to feed their bellies.

•ROYAL LIBERALITY•

When a sovereign provides it, liberality itself does not shine as it should; it more rightly belongs to private citizens; for strictly speaking a king has nothing that is properly his own; he owes *himself* to others. . .

[C] The authority to judge is given not for the sake of the judge, but for the sake of the person judged. A superior is never appointed for his own benefit, but for the benefit of the inferior; a doctor for his patients, not for himself. All authority, like all art, has a goal outside itself.

[B] . . . Which is why the tutors of youthful princes who make a point of impressing on them that there is virtue in lavishness, who exhort them •to be unable to reject anything and •to hold that money is never better spent than when given away (a lesson that I have seen greatly favoured in my own lifetime) either are thinking more of their own good than of their master's, or else don't have a good understanding of whom they are talking to. It is all too easy to stamp liberality on someone who has the means to practice it all he wants at the expense of others. [C] And since generosity is measured not by the size of the gift but by the means of the giver, it amounts to nothing in such powerful hands. They find themselves prodigal before they are liberal. [B] So liberality is little to be commended compared with other royal virtues, and is the only one, said the tyrant Dionysius, that is fully compatible with tyranny itself. I would rather teach a king this line from one ancient ploughman: that is, 'If you want a good crop,

¹ [This was the bridge, completed after Montaigne's death, that is still called the *Pont Neuf* = 'new bridge'.]

you must broadcast your seed by hand, not pour it from your sack.' . . . So when a king has to make gifts or, to put it better, has to pay and restore to so many folk according to their deserts, he should distribute royally and advisedly. If a prince's liberality is indiscriminate and immoderate I would rather he were a miser.

Royal virtue seems mainly to consist in justice, and what most distinguishes kings is the kind of justice that accompanies liberality; they dispense all other kinds of justice through intermediaries; *that* one they reserve to themselves.

Immoderate largesse is a feeble means for them to acquire good will, for it alienates more people than it wins over.

[C] 'The more people you have helped by it, the fewer you can help in the future. Is there a greater folly than doing something you like in such a way that you can do it no longer?' [Cicero]

[B] And if it is exercised without regard for merit, it brings shame on him who receives it, and is received without gratitude. Tyrants have been sacrificed to the people's hatred by the very men they have unjustly advanced, since men of that sort reckon they can assure their possession of ill-gotten gains by showing hatred and contempt for the one they got them from, siding in that respect with the judgement and opinions of the people.

The subjects of a prince who gives excessively *ask* excessively, steering not by reason but by example. We certainly ought often to blush for our impudence. We are already overpaid by just standards when the recompense is equal to our services; for don't we owe something to our princes by natural obligation, 'i.e. without any payment being appropriate'? If our prince covers our expenses, he does too much; it is enough that he helps; anything above that is called a benefit, which cannot be demanded. . . . By our method, there is no end to it; what *has been* received is

forgotten; only *future* liberality is looked to affectionately. So the more a prince exhausts his wealth in giving, the poorer he is in friends. [C] How could he satisfy desires that grow the more they are fulfilled? The man whose thought is on *taking* no longer has it on what he has taken. Nothing is as characteristic of covetousness as ingratitude.

The example of Cyrus fits in here, to serve our kings today as a touchstone for discovering whether their gifts are well or ill bestowed

and to show them how much more happily that emperor distributed his gifts than they do theirs. They have been reduced to borrowing from subjects unknown to them—from those they have harmed rather than those they have helped—receiving helps from them that have nothing *gratuitous* about them but the name).

Croesus reproached Cyrus for his largesse, and calculated what his treasure would have amounted to if he had been more close-fisted. Cyrus sought to justify his liberality; so he dispatched messengers in all directions to the grandees of his empire whose interests he had individually advanced, begging each to help him with as much money as he could for an urgent need of his, and to write to him disclosing the amount. When all these statements were brought to him, he found that each of his friends, thinking it was not enough to offer merely as much as he had received from Cyrus's munificence, had included much of his own wealth. The total sum amounted to far more than Croesus' savings. Whereupon Cyrus said to him, 'I love riches *as much as* other princes do, and take care of them *more*. You see by what little outlay I have acquired the countless riches of so many friends, and how much better treasurers they are than would be hired men with no obligation and no affection, and how my wealth is better lodged *with them* than in my own

treasure-chests, calling down upon me the hatred, envy and contempt of other princes.'

^[B] The emperors derived an excuse for the lavishness of their public games and spectacles from the fact that their authority depended somewhat (in appearance at least) on the will of the Roman populace, which had always been accustomed to be courted by that sort of spectacle and extravagance. Yet it was private citizens who had encouraged this custom of pleasing their fellow-citizens and their equals with such a profusion of magnificence drawn mainly from their own purses. It took on a quite different savour when their masters came to imitate them. ^[C] 'Taking money from rightful owners and giving it to others ought not to be regarded as liberality' [Cicero]. When his son tried winning the support of the Macedonians by presents, Philip reprimanded him in a letter with these words: 'What? Do you want your subjects to regard you as their purser, not as their king? Do you want to win them over? Do it with the benefits of virtue not by the benefits of your coffers.'

[Montaigne now devotes more than a page to uses of the arena for lavish displays under various emperors, of whom only Probus is named: forests, lakes, fighting platforms; fountains; thousand of wild animals killed, and hundreds of gladiators; spectators' seats decorated with jewels; banquets. It is not clear that Montaigne is as revolted by all this as we would be, but he does speak of these spectacles as 'vanities', and uses them as a bridge to his next topic.]

If there is anything excusable in such excesses, it is when the amazement is caused not by the expense but by the originality and ingenuity.

·HOW LITTLE WE KNOW·

Even in these vanities we discover how fertile those times were in minds different from ours. That sort of fertility is on

a par with all nature's other productions. Which is not to say that back then nature put forth its utmost effort. ^[C] We do not *go*; rather we *ramble*, turning this way and that. We retrace our steps. ^[B] I fear that our knowledge is weak in every direction; we do not see far **a** into the distance or far **b** into the past; our knowledge embraces little, and has a short life; short in both **b** extent of time and **a** extent of matter: 'Great heroes lived before Agamemnon; many they were, yet none is lamented, being swept away unknown into the long night' [Horace]. 'Before the Trojan War and the death of Troy, many other poets have sung of other wars' [Lucretius]. $\ddot{I}z\frac{1}{2}$ $\dot{I}z\frac{1}{2}$

... Even if everything that has come down to us about the past by report were true and known to someone, it would be less than nothing compared with what we do not know. And against of a world that flows on while we are in it, how puny and stunted is the knowledge of the most curious men ! A hundred times more is lost for us than what comes to our knowledge, not only of individual events (which fortune often makes exemplary and weighty) but of the state of great polities and nations. When our artillery and printing were invented, we clamoured about miracles; yet at the other end of the world, in China, men had been enjoying them for the preceding thousand years. If we saw as much of the world as we don't see, it is to be believed that we would perceive an endless multiplication and succession of forms. Where nature is concerned, nothing is unique or rare; but where our knowledge is concerned, much certainly is, which constitutes a most pitiful foundation for our scientific laws, offering us a very false idea of everything.

Just as we vainly conclude today that the world is declining into decrepitude, using arguments drawn from our own decline and decadence—'Our age lacks vigour now: even the soil is less abundant' [Lucretius] —that same poet equally vainly inferred the world's birth and youth from the vigour

he saw in the minds of his time, fertile in novelties and inventions in various arts. [He quotes a few lines to that effect, also from Lucretius.]

·THE WESTERN CONQUESTS IN AMERICA·

Our world has just discovered another one: and who will answer for its being the last of its brothers, since until now its existence was unknown to the daemons, to the sybils, and to ourselves? It is no less big and full and solid than our own; its limbs are as well developed: yet it is so new, such a child, that it is still being taught its ABC; less than fifty years ago it knew nothing of writing, weights and measures, clothing, any sort of corn or vine. It was still naked at the breast, living only by what its nursing mother provided. If we are right to infer the end of our world, and that poet is right that his world is young, then this other world will only be emerging into light when ours is leaving it. The universe will be struck with the palsy: one of its limbs will be paralysed, the other fully vigorous.

I fear we¹ shall have considerably hastened the decline and collapse of this new world by our contagion, and that we shall have sold it our opinions and our skills at a very high price. It was an infant world; yet we have not

- whipped it and subjected it to our discipline through the advantage of our natural valour and strength, or
- won it over by our justice and goodness, or
- subjugated it by our magnanimity.

Most of the responses of its peoples, and most of our negotiations with them, show that they were in no way behind us in natural aptitude and clarity of mind. The awe-inspiring magnificence of the cities of Cuzco and Mexico—

and, among many similar things, the garden of that

king where all the trees and fruits and all the plants were, in size and arrangement, as in a normal garden, but all excellently wrought in gold; and in his curio room ·gold replicas of· all the animals native to his lands and his seas

—and the beauty of their workmanship in precious stones, feathers, cotton, and in painting shows that they were not behind us in craftsmanship either.

But as for piety, observance of the laws, goodness, liberality, loyalty and frankness, it served us well that they had more of those than we did; their superiority ruined them, sold them and betrayed them.

As for boldness and courage, as for firmness, constancy, resoluteness against pain, hunger and death, I would not hesitate to compare the examples I could find among them with the most celebrated ancient examples written in the annals of our world on this side of the ocean.

As regards those men who subjugated them, they'd have had no basis for their many victories if it hadn't been for •the ruses and tricks they used to deceive them, •the natural astonishment of those peoples at the sight of the totally unexpected landing of bearded men,

- unlike them in language, religion, build and countenance,
- coming from such a remote part of the world, where they had never imagined that there was anyone living;
- mounted on big unknown monsters, confronting ones who had never seen a horse or any other animal trained to support a man or any other burden;
- with a hard and shiny skin and a sharp glittering weapon, confronting ones who for the miracle of a

¹ [Regarding 'we': Montaigne knows that the conquistadors were Spanish, and he deplors their conduct; but here and elsewhere he thinks of the old world's invasion of the new in terms of what 'we' did to 'them'.]

mirror or a knife would barter a vast wealth of gold or pearls, and who had neither the knowledge nor the material to pierce our steel;

and for •the lightning and thunder of our cannons and harquebuses (which would have confused Caesar himself in his day if they had surprised him when he had had as little experience of them), confronting folk who were (in most regions) naked, with no arms except (at the most) bows, stones, sticks, and wooden shields; folk who, under pretence of friendship and good faith, were caught off their guard by their curiosity to see things strange and unknown.

·EXPLOITING THE AMERICANS' ADMIRABLE QUALITIES·

When I reflect on •the indomitable ardour with which so many thousands of men, women and children came so many times and threw themselves into certain danger in defence of their gods and their freedom; and on •the noble, stubborn willingness to suffer any extremity, any hardship including death, rather than to submit to the domination of those who had so shamefully deceived them (some of them choosing to starve to death in captivity rather than to accept food from the hands of such vilely victorious enemies), I conclude that anyone who attacked them on equal terms in arms, experience and numbers would have been involved in a conflict more dangerous for him than any other that we know of.

If only it had fallen to Alexander or to those ancient Greeks and Romans to make of this a most noble conquest, with such a huge transfer of so many empires, and such revolutions in the circumstances of so many peoples, falling into hands that would have gently polished and cleared away whatever was barbarous in them, encouraging and strengthening the good seeds that nature had produced in them, not only bringing to them the cultivation of land and

adornment of cities of our side of the ocean (so far as they were necessary to them) but also bringing to the natives of those lands the virtues of the Romans and the Greeks! What a renewal that would have been, what a restoration of the fabric of this world, if the first examples of our behaviour that were presented over there had called those peoples to admiration and imitation of virtue, creating between them and us a brotherly fellowship and understanding! How easy it would have been to have made good use of souls so unspoiled, so hungry to learn, and having for the most part such fine natural beginnings! We did the opposite: we took advantage of their ignorance and lack of experience to pervert them more easily towards treachery, debauchery and greed, toward every kind of cruelty and inhumanity, by the example and model of our own *mœurs*. Whoever put such a price on trade and commerce?

•So many cities razed,

•so many nations wiped out,

•so many millions of people put to the sword, and

•the loveliest and richest part of the world overthrown,

all for the trade in pearls and pepper! Tradesmen's victories! Ambition and public enmities never drove men against one another to such horrifying hostilities and to such miserable calamities.

·SOME SPANIARDS LOSE AN ARGUMENT·

Coasting the sea in search of their mines, certain Spaniards landed in a fertile, pleasant and well-populated countryside, and made their usual declarations to its people: **a** they were men of peace, coming from distant voyages, sent on behalf of **b** the king of Castile, the greatest monarch in the inhabited world, to whom **c** the Pope, representing God on earth, had granted dominion over all the Indies; that, if they would be tributaries to him they would be most kindly treated. They

asked for **a** food, and for **e** gold which they needed as a medicine; they incidentally insisted that **f** there is only one God, that our religion is the true one which they advised them to adopt—adding **g** a few threats.

In reply they were told that, **a** if they were men of peace, they didn't behave as though they were; **b** their king must be poor and needy since he came begging; **c** the man who had awarded their country to him was a man who loved dissension, since he gave to a third party something that was not his to give, putting the third party into conflict with its previous possessors; as for **a** food, they would supply some; they had very little **e** gold, it being something they did not highly value since it was of small practical use in life, their sole concern being to live in happiness and contentment; so they [the Spaniards] could boldly take any gold they could find except what was used in the service of their own gods. As for **f** there being only one God, they enjoyed the argument but did not intend to change their religion, having so profitably followed their own for such a long time and being unaccustomed to taking advice from anyone but their friends and acquaintances. As for their **g** threats, it was a sign of lack of judgement in them to go about threatening people without knowing anything about them or their resources; so let them get out of their territory quickly, for they were not used to giving a friendly reception to the greetings and warnings of armed foreigners. They would do to them what they had done to these others, showing them the heads of some executed men around their city.

There is an example of their infantile babbling! At all events, the Spaniards did not settle there or campaign there, or in many other places where they found none of the merchandise they were looking for, no matter what other conveniences could be found there. Witness my cannibals [see *Essays* book I, essay 31].

·THE CONQUESTS OF PERU AND MEXICO·

The last two kings whom the Spaniards drove out were kings over many kings, the most powerful kings in that new world and perhaps also in our own.

The first was the king of Peru, who was captured in battle and put to such an excessive ransom that it defies all belief; when this had been faithfully paid, and he had showed by his dealings that he was of a frank, noble and steadfast heart, a man of honest and tranquil mind, the conquerors. . . . [Let us spare ourselves the details. They plundered Peru for more gold, framed the king on a charge that he was trying to raise his provinces against them, tried him for this and condemned him to death, and—while he was being tortured—got him to accept Christian baptism, as their price for merely hanging him instead of burning him to death.]

The second was the king of Mexico: he had long held out during the siege of his city, showing (if ever a prince and people did so) what can be achieved by endurance and perseverance, when he had the misfortune to fall alive into his enemies' hands, on their promise to treat him like a king (and during his captivity he showed nothing unworthy of that title). Not finding after that victory as much gold as they had anticipated, they—the Spaniards—ransacked and searched everything, and then set about seeking information by inflicting the most painful tortures they could devise on the prisoners they held. But after getting nothing from this, having come up against hearts stronger than their tortures, they finally fell into such a rage that—contrary to their word and to all law of nations—they sentenced the king and one of the chief lords of his court to be tortured in each other's sight. [Again, let us spare ourselves the details, which are ghastly. The torture stopped, with the king nearly burned to death, 'because his fortitude made their cruelty more and more sameful'. After he tried to escape, they hanged him, and 'he

made an end worthy of a great-souled prince'. Montaigne goes on to describe an occasion when the Spaniards burned to death 'in the same fire' 460 prisoners of war.]]

We have these accounts from 'the Spaniards' themselves, for they not only admit them but boast of them and proclaim them. Would this be as a testimonial to their justice or to their religious zeal? Truly those 'methods' are too contrary, too hostile, to such a holy purpose. If they had proposed to spread our faith, they would have reflected that faith grows not by possession of territory but by possession of men, and would have had killings enough through the necessities of war, without adding indiscriminate slaughter, as total as their swords and pyres could make it, as though they were butchering wild animals, sparing only as many as they calculated were needed for the wretched slavery of working and servicing their mines. So that several leaders 'of the conquistadors' were punished by death in the lands they had conquered, by order of the kings of Castile who were justly shocked at their dreadful conduct; and almost all—not just the leaders—were looked down on and hated. Most were buried there, without any profit from their conquest. God allowed that their vast plunder should be engulfed either by the sea as they were shipping it or in that internecine strife in which they all devoured each other.

·MEXICAN COINAGE·

The gold actually received, even into the hands of a wise and thrifty prince [King Phillip II of Spain], falls far short of the expectations aroused in his predecessors and of the abundant riches discovered when men first went to those new lands; for while great profit is still being drawn from them, we see that it is nothing compared with what was to be expected. 'The first takings were very lavish' because they knew nothing about the use of coinage; so that all their gold

was gathered in one place, used only for display and parade; like a chattel handed on from father to son by many powerful kings, who always worked their mines to make that great heap of vases and statues to adorn their palaces and their temples; whereas our gold is all in circulation and in trade. We cut it up small, and change it into a thousand forms; we scatter and disperse it. Just imagine what it would be like if our kings, over several centuries, had likewise—i.e. in Mexican fashion—piled up all the gold they could find and kept it idle!

The people of the kingdom of Mexico were somewhat more urban and more skilled in the arts than the other nations over there. Thus they judged, as we do, that the entire world was near its end, taking as a sign of this the desolation that we inflicted on them. They believed that the world's existence was divided into five periods, the lifetimes of five successive suns. Four suns had already done their time, the one shining on them now being the fifth. [He gives some details of how, according to Mexican belief, the different suns died: flood, the falling of the sky, fire, wind. Then:] After the death of that fourth sun, the world was in perpetual darkness for twenty-five years, during the fifteenth of which a man and a woman were created who remade the human race. Ten years later, on a certain day of their calendar, the sun appeared, newly created; and since then they have counted their years from that day. . . . Their dating of that fourth change tallies with that great conjunction of stars which—800 years ago, according to the reckoning of our astrologers—produced many great changes and innovations in the world.

·BACK TO ROYAL OSTENTATION·

As for pomp and magnificence, which led me into this subject, neither Greece nor Rome nor Egypt can compare any of their

constructions, for difficulty or utility or nobility, with the highway to be seen in Peru, built by their kings along 300 leagues from the city of Quito to the city of Cuzco. [He exclaims at length about the beauty of the road, its borders, and the palaces punctuating it; and about how difficult it must have been to do all this with the limited means available in Peru.]

Let us return to our coaches. Instead of using coaches or vehicles of any kind they have themselves carried on the

shoulders of men. The day he was captured, that last king of Peru was in the midst of his army, borne seated on a golden chair. The Spaniards in their attempts to topple him (as they wanted to take him alive) killed many of his bearers, but many more vied to take the places of the dead, so that, no matter how many they slaughtered, they could not bring him down until a mounted soldier dashed in, grabbed hold of him and pulled him to the ground.

7. The disadvantage of greatness

[B] Since we cannot attain it, let us get our revenge by speaking ill of it. Not that finding defects in something has to be speaking ill of it; there are defects in all things, no matter how beautiful or desirable they are. In general it [= greatness, high rank] has this evident advantage that it can step down whenever it wants to, and that it is virtually free to choose either condition, ·high or low·. For not all heights require a *fall* if one is to come down from them; there are more from which one can descend without falling.

It does indeed seem to me that we overvalue it, and also overvalue the resolution of people whom we have either seen or heard of who despised it or laid it down of their own accord. Its essence is not so advantageous that it takes a miracle to reject it!

What I find hard is striving to bear ills, but as for being content with a middling measure of fortune and avoiding greatness, I find very little difficulty in that. That is a virtue that I think I—who am only a fledgling—could achieve without much exertion. What may be done, then, by men who would also take account of the glory that accompanies such a rejection! There may indeed be more ambition in *that* than in the desire for and enjoyment of greatness. Ambition is never acting more in accord with its nature than when it adopts some out-of-the-way and unused path.

I sharpen my courage towards endurance; I weaken it towards desire. I have as much to wish for as the next man, and I allow my wishes as much freedom and indiscretion; yet it has never occurred to me to wish for imperial or royal rank, or for the eminence of those high and commanding fortunes. My aims do not tend that way: I love myself too much for that.

When I think of growing—of *going up*—it is in a lowly way, with a constricted and timid growth appropriate to myself, a growth in resolution, wisdom, health, beauty, and even wealth. But my imagination is oppressed by great renown or mighty authority. Quite the opposite to that other man,¹ I would rather be second or third in Pîç½rigueux than first in Paris—or at least, to be quite truthful, I would prefer being third in Paris to being first, the one in charge. I want neither to be •a wretched nobody arguing with a doorkeeper nor •one who causes crowds to part with awe as I pass through. I am trained to a middle station, by my lot and also by my taste. [C] In the conduct of my life and my enterprises I have shown that I have avoided rather than otherwise stepping above the degree of fortune in which God placed me at birth. Anything established by nature is equally just and easy. . . .

[B] I dislike all domination, both active and passive. [C] Otanes, one of the seven who had rightful claims to the throne of Persia, took a decision I would gladly have taken. To his rivals he abandoned his rights to be elected or chosen by lot, on condition that he and his family could live in that empire free from all authority and subjection except to the ancient laws, and enjoy every freedom not prejudicial to those laws, since he found it intolerable to give or to accept commands.

[B] The toughest and most difficult job in the world, in my judgement, is worthily to act the king. I excuse more of their shortcomings than men commonly do, out of consideration for the horrifying weight of their office, which stuns me. It is difficult for such an immoderate power to observe moderation. Yet even for men of less excellent character it is a singular incitement to virtue to be lodged in a place like that, where you can do no good deed that is not noted

¹ [Julius Caesar, reported by Plutarch as saying that he would rather be first in a tiny village than second in Rome.]

and chronicled, where the slightest good action affects so many people, and where your talents, like those of preachers, are mainly addressed to the populace—not an exacting judge, one easily duped and easily contented.

There are few matters on which we can give an unbiased judgement because there are few in which we do not have in some way a private interest. Superiority and inferiority of position, mastery and subjection, are tied to each other by natural rivalry and competition; they need to be always pillaging each other. I do not believe what either says about the rights of the other; when the issue can be settled, let it be done by reason, which is inflexible and impassive.

Less than a month ago I was leafing through two Scottish books on this subject; the people's man makes the king's position worse than a carter's; the monarchist lodges him a few yards higher than God in sovereignty and power.

Of the disadvantages of greatness, the one I want to talk about here—because of an event that has just called my attention to it—is the following. In all our dealings with one another there may be nothing more enjoyable than those contests we have as rivals for honour and worth, whether in exercises of the body or of the mind; in which a sovereign can take no real part. Indeed it has often seemed to me that our respect for high rank leads us to treat princes disdainfully and insultingly in these matters.

In my boyhood I was immeasurably offended when those who played sports against me spared themselves from taking this seriously because they regarded me as an opponent not worth the effort. We see that happening to princes every day, because each opponent considers himself too low on the scale to beat them. Whenever a prince is seen to have the slightest desire to win, every opponent will labour to see that he does, preferring to betray his own glory rather than offend the prince's, putting in just enough effort to enhance the

prince's reputation. What part do princes have in a friendly skirmish where everyone is on their side? I seem to see those paladins of times past who entered jousts and combats with enchanted bodies and weapons. Racing against Alexander, Brisson pretended to run his best; Alexander rebuked him for it, but he ought to have had him whipped.

That is why Carneades said that the only thing the sons of princes learned properly was horsemanship, because in all other sports the opponent yields to them and lets them win, whereas a horse is neither a flatterer nor a courtier, and will throw a king's son as soon as a porter's.

Homer was compelled to allow Venus, sweet and delicate as she was, to be wounded at the siege of Troy, so as to endow her with boldness and courage, qualities of which no trace is found in those who are exempt from danger. The gods are made to get angry, feel fear and flee, to be jealous, sorrowful and passionate, in order to honour them with virtues which among us are built of these imperfections.

No-one can claim to a share in the honour and delight that follow dangerous actions if he has no part in the danger and difficulty. It is pitiful to have such power that everything gives way to you. Your lot removes you too far from society and the companionship of men; it plants you too far to one side. That unchallenging and facile ease of making everything bow down before you is the enemy of every sort of pleasure; it is sliding, not walking; sleeping, not living. If you imagine a man endowed with omnipotence, you throw him into an abyss; he has to beg you for obstacles and opposition, as a charity; his being and his welfare are at risk.

Their good qualities are dead and wasted, for qualities are known only by comparison, and such men are out of comparison; they have little experience of true praise, being battered by such continual and uniform approval. In dealing with the stupidest of their subjects, they have no way of

getting the advantage over him. He can say 'I did that because he is my king', and it seems to him that this says clearly enough that he contributed to his own defeat.

This royal quality stifles and consumes their real and essential qualities; these are sunk in royalty, which leaves them with no way of showing their worth except actions that directly touch on their royal state and contribute to it, namely the duties of their office. Such a person is so entirely a king that he has no other existence. That extraneous glare that surrounds him hides him, conceals him from us; our sight breaks and is dissipated by it,¹ being overwhelmed and stopped by this strong light. The Senate awarded the prize for eloquence to Tiberius; he declined it, believing that even if it were justified he could get no satisfaction from a judgment so unfreely reached.

As we concede to them every advantage of honour, we confirm and authorise their defects and bad actions, not only by approval but also by imitation. Each of Alexander's followers kept his head tilted to one side, as he did; the flatterers of Dionysius bumped into each other when he was present, stumbled on and knocked over whatever was under their feet, signifying that they were as short-sighted as he was. . . . I have known men pretend to be deaf; and Plutarch knew courtiers who repudiated their wives, whom they loved, because their lord hated his.

What is more, lechery has been seen in fashion among them, and every kind of licentiousness; as also disloyalty, blasphemy, cruelty; as well as heresy; as well as superstition, irreligion and decadence; and worse, if worse there be. Mithridates yearned to be honoured as a good doctor, so his flatterers offered him their limbs to be incised and

cauterised; the 'worse' I am speaking of is the conduct of those others who allowed a nobler and more delicate part to be cauterised—their soul.

But to end where I began: when the Emperor Hadrian was arguing with the philosopher Favorinus about the meaning of a word, Favorinus quickly let him win the argument. When his friends criticised him for this he replied, 'You are joking! Would you want him to be less learned than I am, he who commands thirty legions?' Augustus wrote some verses against Asinius Pollio. 'And I', said Pollio, 'am keeping quiet; it is not wise to be a scribe against a man who can proscribe.'² And he was right. For Dionysius, because he could not match Philoxenus in poetry or Plato in prose, condemned one to the quarries and sent the other to be sold as a slave on the island of Aegina.

8. The art of discussion

[B] It is a custom of our justice to punish some as a warning to others. [C] To punish them for having done wrong would, as Plato says, be stupid; for what is done cannot be undone. They are punished to stop them from repeating the same wrong-doing or to make others avoid the example they have set. [B] We do not correct the man we hang; we correct others through him.

I do the same. My defects are by now natural and incorrigible; but just as worthy men serve the public as models to follow, I may serve it as a model to avoid: 'You can see, can't you, how wretchedly Albus' son is living and how poor Barrus is? A good lesson in not squandering

¹ [This reflects the then-current view that that we see objects by means of rays leaving our eyes.]

² [*ce n'est pas sagesse d'écrire à l'envy de celui qui peut proscrire.*]

your inheritance' [Horace]. By publishing and indicting my imperfections I may teach someone to fear them. The parts that I most esteem in myself derive more honour from self-accusation than from self-commendation. That is why I so often return to self-accusation and linger over it. Yet, when all is said and done, you never talk about yourself without loss. Self-accusations are always believed, self-praise never is.

Perhaps I am not the only one who is temperamentally given to learning better by counter-example than by example, by avoiding than by following. The Elder Cato was thinking of that sort of instruction when he said that the wise have more to learn from the fools than the fools from the wise. . . .

My horror of cruelty pushes me deeper into clemency than any example of clemency could pull me. A good horseman does less to improve my seat in the saddle than does the sight of a lawyer or a Venetian on horseback; and a bad use of language corrects my own better than a good one does. Every day someone else's stupid deportment warns and counsels me. What stings us touches and affects us better than what pleases us. The only way of improving ourselves these days is by stepping back, by disagreement more than by agreement, by difference more than by similarity. Having learned little from good examples, I make use of the bad ones, which are everywhere to be found. ^[C]I tried to make myself as agreeable as I saw others being unpleasant; as firm as I saw others being flabby; as gentle as I saw others being sharp. But I was setting myself unattainable standards.

^[B]The most fruitful and natural exercise of our mind, in my opinion, is conversation. I find the practice of it the most delightful activity in our lives. That is why, if I were forced right now to choose, I think I would rather lose my sight than my powers of hearing or speech. The Athenians and the Romans too kept this exercise in great honour in

their academies. In our own times the Italians retain some vestiges of it—greatly to their benefit, as can be seen from a comparison of their intelligence and ours.

The study of books is a languishing and feeble activity that gives no heat, whereas conversation provides teaching and exercise at the same time. If I am talking with a strong and solid opponent, he attacks me on the flanks, prods me right and left; his ideas launch mine. Rivalry, competitiveness and glory will drive me and raise me above myself. In conversation agreement is the most boring quality.

Just as our mind is strengthened by contact with vigorous and well-ordered minds, so too it is impossible to overstate how much it loses and deteriorates by the continuous commerce and contact we have with mean and sickly minds. No infection is as contagious as that one. . . . I love arguing and discussing, but with only a few men and for my own sake. For to serve as a spectacle to the great, and make a competitive parade of one's wit and chatter, is in my opinion a very unbecoming trade for man of honour.

Stupidity is a bad quality; but to be unable to endure it, to be vexed and ground down by it as happens to me, is another sort of malady that is almost as troublesome as stupidity; and that is what I now wish to accuse myself of.

I embark upon conversation and argument very freely and easily, because opinions do not find in me a ready soil to penetrate and take deep roots in. No proposition shocks me, no belief offends me, however contrary to my own it is. There is no fancy so frivolous and so extravagant that it does not appear to me to be quite suitable to the production of the human mind. Those of us who deprive our judgement of the right to pass sentence look gently on opinions different from ours; and if we don't lend them our approval, we do readily lend them our ears. When one scale in the balance is quite empty, I let the other go down under the weight of

an old woman's dreams. And it seems to me excusable if I choose the odd number rather than the even, or Thursday rather than Friday; if I prefer to be twelfth or fourteenth at table rather than thirteenth; if when travelling I would rather see a hare skirting my path than see one crossing it, and offer my left foot to be booted before the right. All such idle fancies, which are believed all around us, deserve at least to be heard. For me they outweigh only emptiness, but they do outweigh that. Popular and unfounded opinions have a weight that counts for *something* in nature. Someone who does not let himself go that far may be avoiding the fault of superstition by falling into the fault of obstinate dogmatism.

·LEARNING FROM BEING CONTRADICTED·

So contradictions of ·my· judgements do not offend me or do me any harm; they merely arouse and exercise me. We avoid correction; we ought to come forward and accept it, especially when it comes in the form of conversation rather than of instruction. When we encounter opposition, we look to see not •if it is just but •how we can get rid of it, whether it is right or wrong. Instead of stretching out our arms to it we stretch out our claws.

I could put up with being roughly handled by my friends: 'You're a fool!' 'You're dreaming!' Among gentlemen I like people to express themselves boldly, their words following wherever their thoughts lead. We ought to toughen and fortify our ears against being seduced by the sound of polite words. I like a strong, intimate, manly fellowship, the kind of friendship that delights in sharp exchanges, as love does in bites and scratches that draw blood. ^[C]It is not strong or magnanimous enough if it is not quarrelsome, if it is civilised and artful, if it fears clashes and moves with constraint. . . .

^[B]When someone contradicts me, he arouses my attention, not my anger. I go to meet the man who is contradicting

me, who is instructing me. The cause of truth ought to be the common cause for ·us· both. What will he—the angry man—answer? The passion of anger has already damaged his judgement. Turbulence has seized it before reason can ·get a hold·. It would be useful if we bet on the outcome of our disputes, and kept a written record of our losses, so that my manservant could say: 'Last year your ignorance and dogmatism cost you one hundred crowns on twenty occasions.'

I give a warm welcome to truth, in whatever hand I find it; when I see it approaching from afar, I surrender to it cheerfully, laying down my defeated weapons. ^[C]And provided it does not come with too imperious and schoolmasterish a frown, I will offer my shoulders to ·the whips of· the criticisms people make of my writings; I have often made changes more out of politeness than to improve them, preferring to please and encourage people's freedom to criticise me by my readiness to give way—yes, even when it costs me something. Yet it is difficult these days to get men to do that. They have no stomach for correcting, because they have no stomach for being corrected, and never speak forthrightly among themselves.

I take so much pleasure in being judged and known that I hardly care which of the two forms this takes. My thinking so often contradicts and condemns itself that it's all one to me if someone else does so, especially seeing that I give his criticism only as much authority as I please. But I break off with anyone who conducts himself as high-handedly as a man I know who regrets having given advice if it is not accepted, and feels insulted if one balks at following it. . . .

^[B]I really do seek the company of those who treat me roughly more than of those who fear me. It is an insipid and harmful pleasure to engage with people who admire us and defer to us. Antisthenes ordered his children never to

thank or be grateful to a man who praised them. I feel much prouder of the victory I win over myself when in the heat of battle I make myself give way beneath my adversary's powers of reason than I feel gratified by the victory I win over him through his weakness.

In short I receive and acknowledge any attacks, however feeble, if they are made directly, but I am cannot put up with ones that are not made in due form. I care little about the subject-matter, all opinions are the same to me, and I am almost indifferent about which opinion wins. I can go on peacefully arguing all day if the debate is conducted with due order. [C] What I ask for is not so much forceful and subtle argument as order—the order that is seen every day in the disputes of shepherds and shop-assistants, never among *us*. If they go astray, it is through incivility; so indeed do we. But their turbulence and impatience distract them from their theme: their arguments keep on course. If they get ahead of one another, if they don't wait for one another, at least they understand one another.¹ For me any answer is excellent if it is to the point. [B] But when the argument is turbulent and disorderly, I give up the •subject-matter and cling angrily and indiscriminately to the •form, throwing myself into a style of debate that is stubborn, ill-willed and imperious, one I have to blush for later.

•THE HARM IN ARGUING WITH FOOLS•

[C] It is impossible to deal in good faith with a fool. Not only my judgement is corrupted in the hands of such an impetuous master, but so also is my conscience. Our disputes ought to be forbidden and punished like other verbal crimes. Always driven and governed by anger, what vices do they not stir and heap up? We feel hostility first against the reasons and then against the men. We learn to argue only in order to

contradict; and with each participant contradicting and being contradicted, the upshot of the debate is the destruction and annihilation of the truth. That is why Plato in his *Republic* prohibits this exercise to ill-endowed minds not suited to it.

[B] You are in quest of the truth. What's the use of walking that road with someone whose pace and style are no good? We do no wrong to the subject when we pull back from it in order to examine the way to treat it—I do not mean a scholastic and artificial way, I mean a natural way, based on a healthy understanding. ·But· what will come of it in the end? One goes east, the other west; they lose the fundamental point, mislaying it in the crowd of incidentals. After a tempestuous hour they don't know what they are looking for. One is wide of the mark, another too high, another too low. One fastens on a word or a comparison; another no longer sees his opponent's arguments, being too caught up in his own train of thought; he is thinking about following himself, not you. Another, realising he is too weak ·for this debate·, is afraid of everything, denies everything and, from the outset, muddles and [C] confuses the argument, or else, at the climax of the debate he falls into a rebellious total silence, affecting. . . a haughty disdain or an absurdly modest desire to avoid contention. [B] This one doesn't care how much he drops his own guard provided that he can hit you. Another counts his words and thinks they are as weighty as reasons. That one merely exploits the greater power of his voice and lungs. [He mentions three other kinds of misconduct in debate, before moving on to the one that upsets him most; he pursues it for several paragraphs.]

Lastly, there is the man who sees nothing in reason, but holds you besieged within a hedge of dialectical conclusions and logical formulae. Who will not begin to distrust learning,

¹ [The second and third occurrences of 'one another' are expressed in the original simply by *s'*, a convenience that English lacks.]

doubting whether we can extract from it any solid profit of practical use in life, considering the use we make of it? Who has acquired understanding through logic? Where are its fine promises? [C] ‘Neither for living better nor for reasoning more fitly’ [Cicero]. [B] Is there more of a hotchpotch to be seen in the cackle of fishwives than in the public disputations of professional logicians? I would rather have my son learn to speak in the tavern than in the schools that teach speaking.

·‘LEARNED’ FOOLS·

Take a Master of Arts; converse with him. Why does he not make us •feel the excellence of his ‘arts’ and •captivate the women and the ignoramuses—such as we are—with admiration for the solidity of his arguments and the beauty of his order? Why doesn’t he overmaster us and sway us at his will? Why does a man with such advantages in matter and style combine his thrusts with insults, recklessness and rage? If he strips off his hood, his gown and his Latin, and stops battering our ears with pure uncooked Aristotle, you will take him for one of us—or worse! This complication and interlacing of language with which they beset us remind me of sleight-of-hand tricks: their dexterity has compelling force over our senses, but makes not the slightest difference to our beliefs. Except for this jugglery, everything they do is ordinary and base. Being more learned does not make them less stupid.

I love and honour learning as much as those who have it; and when used properly it is man’s noblest and most powerful acquisition. But in the countless people who •make it the base and foundation of their worth and achievement, who •appeal from their understanding to their memory—[C] ‘hiding behind other men’s shadows’ [Seneca]—[B] and •who can do nothing except by book, I hate it, if I dare say so, a little more than I hate stupidity.

In my part of the country and in my lifetime, learning amends purses, rarely souls. If it encounters dull souls, it weighs them down and suffocates them, as a raw and undigested mass; if they are very fine-grained, it is apt to purge, clarify and subtilise them into vacuity. Learning is •a thing of almost indifferent quality—a most useful adjunct to a well-endowed soul, pernicious and harmful to another; or rather, •a thing of very precious use that will not allow itself to be possessed at a low price: in one hand it is a royal sceptre, in another a fool’s bauble. But let us get on.

What greater victory do you expect than to teach your enemy that he is no match for you? When you get the better of him by your argument, the winner is the truth; when you do so by your order and style, the winner is you ! [C] I believe that in Plato and Xenophon, Socrates debates more for the sake of the arguers than for the sake of the arguement, and to instruct Euthydemus and Protagoras in their own incompetence rather than the incompetence their art. He seizes hold of the first subject that comes to hand, as a man aims at something more useful than throwing light on it, namely enlightening the minds that he undertakes to manage and exercise.

[B] Our real quarry is the agitation of the chase; there is no excuse for our conducting this badly or incompetently; failing in the catch is quite another thing. For we are born to *seek* the truth; it’s for a greater power ·than ours· to *possess* it. Truth is not (as Democritus said it is) hidden in the bottom of abysses, but elevated to an infinite height in the divine knowledge. [C] The world is but a school of inquiry. [B] The question is not who will spear the ring but who will make the best runs at it. The man who says what is true can act as foolishly as the one who says what is untrue, for we are concerned with the manner of speaking, not the matter. My humour is to consider the form as much as the substance,

and the lawyer as much as his case, as Alcibiades told us to. ^[C] Every day I spend time reading authors without caring about their learning, looking not for their subject-matter but for how they handle it. Just as I seek the company of some famous mind, not to be taught by it but to get to know it.

^[B] Any man can speak truly; few men can speak with order, wisely and adequately. What offends me is not error that comes from ignorance, but ineptitude. I have often broken off discussing a bargain, even one advantageous to me, because of the incompetent bickering of those I was bargaining with. As for those who are subject to my authority, I do not lose my temper as much as once a year over their mistakes, but we are daily at each other's throats over the stupidity and obstinacy of their assertions, excuses and asinine defences. . . .

Yes, but what if I myself am taking things for other than they are? That is, what if my servants are not as stupidly obstinate as I find them to be? That may well be; but I still blame my impatience, and hold **(i)** that impatience is equally a defect in the one who is right and the one who is wrong, since there is always a tyrannical ill humour in being unable to tolerate a way of thinking different from one's own; and that **(ii)** there is in truth no greater, more constant, or more bizarre absurdity than to be provoked and enraged by the world's absurdities. For it mainly gets us upset with ourselves; and that philosopher of old [Heraclitus, who wept at the world's folly] would never have lacked occasion for his tears if he had concentrated on himself. . . .

·WHAT DISQUALIFIES ONE MAN FROM CRITICISING ANOTHER?·

How many statements and replies I make every day that are silly by my standards—and surely even more by the standards of others! ^[C] If I bite my lips for them, what must the others be doing! To sum up, we should live

among the living and let the stream flow under the bridge without worrying about it or at least without being upset by it. ^[B] Indeed, why can we encounter a man with a twisted deformed body without getting upset, but cannot tolerate a deranged mind without flying into a rage? This vicious harshness owes more to the judge than to the fault. Let us always have Plato's saying on our lips: ^[C] 'If I find something unsound, may it not be because I myself am unsound?' ^[B] Am I not the one at fault? Can't my criticism be turned against me?' A wise and inspired refrain that chastises mankind's most common and universal error. ^[C] Not only can the reproaches we make to each other be regularly turned against us, but so also can our reasons and our arguments in matters of controversy; we run ourselves through with our own weapons. Antiquity has left me with plenty of weighty examples of this. ^[B] As it was ingeniously and aptly put by the man who first said it: 'Everyone's shit smells good to himself' [Erasmus].

^[C] Our eyes see nothing behind us. A hundred times a day we make fun of ourselves in the person of our neighbour, detest in others the faults that are more clearly in ourselves, and wonder at them with amazing impudence and heedlessness. Only yesterday I saw a man of understanding and good birth making jokes, as funny as they were pertinent, about the silly way another man went bashing everyone's ear about his family-tree and his family alliances, more than half of which were false; that kind of man being most inclined to launch out on such stupid subjects when his escutcheon is more dubious and least certain; yet he too, if he had turned back on himself, would have found that he was hardly less extravagant and boring in broadcasting and extolling the distinctions of *his wife's* family. What a pushy presumption in which a wife is seen to be armed by the hands of her own husband! If they understood Latin we ought to say to such

people: 'Come now, If she is not mad enough of herself, urge her on!' [Terence; Montaigne quotes this in Latin].

I'm not saying that no-one should make accusations unless he is spotless, for then no-one would make them. My point is that when our judgement brings a charge against someone else over a matter then in question, this does not exempt us from judging ourselves. It is a work of charity for someone who cannot weed out a defect in himself to try nevertheless to weed it out in others in whom it may have a less malignant and stubborn root.

Nor does it seem to me an appropriate answer to someone who warns me of my fault to say that he has it too. What of it? The warning is still true and useful. If we had a good nose, our excrement ought to stink worse to us because it is our own. . . .

[B] The senses are our proper and primary judges, which perceive things only by their external features; so it is no wonder that in all the working parts of our society there is such a constant and universal admixture of surface ceremonies and appearances; with the result that the best and most effective part of our politics consists in those. It is still *man* we are dealing with, and his nature is amazingly corporeal.

Those who in recent years have tried to construct for us a system of religious practice that is contemplative and spiritual should not be astonished if there are folk who think that religion would have melted and slipped through their fingers if it did not hold fast among us less for itself than as a mark, sign and means of division and of faction.

As in discussion: the gravity, the gown, and the social status of the speaker often give authority to empty and inept remarks. No-one would presume that a personage so redoubtable and with such a retinue has no talents that aren't merely commonplace, and that a man to whom so many

commissions and offices are given—a man so disdainful and so arrogant—is not abler than this other man who bows to him at such a distance, whom nobody employs! Not only the words of such people but the facial expressions they put on are watched and taken into account, each onlooker working to put some fine and solid interpretation on them. If they condescend to join in ordinary discussions and are presented with anything but approval and reverence, they beat you down with the authority of their experience:

- they have heard. . . .
- they have seen. . . .
- they have done. . . .

you are overwhelmed with examples. I would like to tell them that the fruit of a surgeon's experience lies not in a recital of his cases—he has cured four patients of the plague and three of the gout—unless he can •extract from them material for forming his judgement and •convince us that he has been made wiser by the practice of his medical art. . . .

If these people have been improved by their travels and their missions, that should appear in the products of their understanding. It is not enough to *count* one's our experiences; they should be *weighed* and *sorted*; and they should be digested and distilled so as to extract the reasons and conclusions they contain.

There never were so many historians! It is always good and useful to listen to them, for they provide us with an abundance of fine and praiseworthy instruction from the storehouse of their memory—a great help, surely, in the service of our life. But that is not my present topic; I am concerned with whether these narrators and collectors are themselves worthy of praise.

I hate every sort of tyranny, both in speech and in action. I am glad to brace myself against those trivial incidentals that delude our judgement through our senses; and by keeping

a close watch on men of extraordinary eminence, I have discovered that most of them are just like the rest of us: 'Common sense is rare enough in that high station' [Juvenal].

Perhaps we esteem them ·less than they deserve· and perceive them for less than they are, because they undertake more and are more on display; they do not match the burden they have taken on. There should be more vigour and power in the bearer than in the load. Someone who has not exerted his full strength leaves you to guess whether he has any more in reserve, whether he has been tested to the breaking point; one who succumbs under the weight reveals his measure and the weakness of his shoulders. That is why so many of the learned are seen to have inadequate souls—more than other people. They would have made good farmers, good merchants, good craftsmen; their natural forces were tailored to such proportions. Knowledge is a very weighty thing; they collapse under it. Their mind has not enough energy or skill to display and distribute that noble material, to use it and get help from it. It takes a powerful nature to do that, and there aren't many of those. [C] And weak minds, said Socrates, corrupt the dignity of philosophy in handling it; badly sheathed, it appears both useless and harmful. [B] This is how they grow rotten and make fools of themselves: 'Like an ape, that imitator of the human face, which a prankish boy dresses up in precious silken robes, leaving its backside bare, to amuse the guests at table.' [Claudian]

Likewise for those who rule and command us, who hold the world in their hands: it is not enough for them to have an ordinary intelligence, to be able to do what we are able to do; they are far beneath us if they are not far above us. As they promise more, so they owe more; so that for them *silence* is not merely courteous and grave but also often profitable and economical. For when Megabysus went to see Appelles in his studio, he long remained silent and then began to talk about

the works of ·Appelles's· art, for which he received this rough reprimand: 'As long as you kept silent, you seemed to be a great somebody because of your chains and your retinue; but now that we have heard you speak, there is no-one in my workshop—right down to the mere apprentices—who does not despise you.' Those magnificent trappings, that grand estate, didn't allow him to be ignorant in the ordinary way and to speak incompetently about paintings; he should have kept quiet, maintaining that outward presumed competence. For how many stupid souls in my time has a cold, taciturn mien served as a title to wisdom and ability!

·JUDGING KINGS BY THE CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR REIGN·

Inevitably dignities and offices are bestowed more by fortune than by merit; it is wrong to hold this against kings, as people often do. On the contrary, it is a wonder that they do so well at it [i.e. at assigning dignities and offices], having so little skill in it. [C] 'A prince's greatest virtue is to know his people' [Martial]. [B] For nature has not given them a vision that can extend over a whole populace so as to detect pre-eminence and see into our bosoms where is lodged the knowledge of our will and of our best worth. They have to select us by conjecture and by groping; by family, wealth, learning, the voice of the people—all very feeble evidence. Anyone who could discover how to judge men justly and choose them reasonably would, at a stroke, establish a perfect form of government.

'Yes. But he successfully carried out that great affair.' That says something ·in his favour·, but it doesn't say enough; for we rightly accept the maxim that plans should not be judged by results. [C] The Carthaginians punished bad planning by their commanders even when they were put right by a satisfactory outcome. And the Roman people often refused a ceremonial triumph for great and very profitable

victories because the commander's conduct did not match his good luck. [B] In this world's activities we commonly see that fortune rivals virtue, showing us what power it has over everything and delighting in striking down our presumption: since it cannot make the incompetent wise, it makes them lucky. It likes to take a hand, favouring performances whose course has been entirely its own. That is why we can see, every day, the simplest among us bringing great public and private tasks to successful conclusions. And just as Siramnes the Persian replied to those who were amazed that his enterprises turned out so badly, given that his plans for them were so wise, by saying that he alone was master of his plans while the outcome of his enterprises was up to fortune, so also these people could make the same reply but with an opposite twist.

Most of the world's events just *happen*: 'The Fates find a way' [Virgil]. The outcome often lends authority to very inept management. Our intervention is little more than routine, a matter of tradition and example more often than of reason. Once, astounded by the greatness of a venture, I inquired from those who had brought it to a successful conclusion what their motives and methods were; I found nothing but ordinary notions; and the most ordinary and usual ones may also be the most reliable and the most suitable in practice if not for show.

What if the flattest reasons are the most solidly founded, if the lowest, loosest and most threadbare are the best adapted to affairs? To preserve the authority of the

next phrase: *Conseil des Roys*,

translated by Frame as: King's Council,

by Screech as: Privy Council,

by Cotton as: counsels of kings.

[Cotton is nearest to right. Montaigne is talking about the credibility

of kings (plural) as a class. He imagines them as gathered together in a single committee or *Conseil* (singular, missed by Cotton), this being a fiction that lets him make his point. To resume:] To preserve the authority of the Council of Kings, there is no need for outsiders to take part in it or to see into it further than the first barrier. If we want to maintain its reputation it must be taken on trust, as a whole.

In my deliberations I outline the topic a little and consider it sketchily in its first aspects; as for its heart and core, I usually leave that to heaven: 'Entrust the rest to the gods' [Horace].

·THE ROLE OF CHANCE IN HUMAN AFFAIRS·

Good luck and bad luck are in my opinion two sovereign powers. It is unwise to think that the role of fortune can be played by human wisdom. And it is a vain undertaking if someone presumes to embrace both causes and consequences and to lead the progress of his action by the hand—vain especially in deliberations of war. There was never more military circumspection and prudence than there is today; are they perhaps afraid of getting lost en route, reserving themselves for the climax of the drama?

I say further that our wisdom and deliberation are themselves mostly led by chance. My will and my reasoning are moved now in one way, now in another, and many of these movements are directed without me. My reason is daily subject to incitements and agitations that are due to chance: 'The phases of their minds are changed; the emotions in their breasts are driven hither and thither like clouds before the wind' [Virgil].

Look and see who wield most power in our cities, who do their jobs best; they will usually be found to be the least able. There have been cases where women, children and lunatics have ruled their states just as well as the most

talented princes. ^[C] Coarse-minded men, says Thucydides, succeed in such things more commonly than subtle ones do. ^[B] We ascribe the effects of their good fortune to their wisdom! ^[C] ‘Each outstanding man is raised by his good fortune; we then say that he is wise’ [Plautus]. ^[B] That is why I insist that, in all our activities, their outcomes provide meagre testimony of our worth and ability.

The point I was about to make was this: we need only to see a man raised to great dignity for our opinions to become insensibly suffused with an image of greatness, of ability, and we convince ourselves that by growing in status and authority he has grown in merit, although three days earlier we knew him to be an insignificant man. Our judgements of him are based not on his worth but. . . .on the powers of his rank. Let fortune turn again, let him fall and rejoin the crowd, and everyone will wonder what had made him soar so high:

‘Is this the same man? Is *that* all he knew when he was up there? Are princes satisfied with so little? [Sarcastically:] We *were* in good hands!’

That is something I have seen many times in my time. Why, even the mask of greatness put on in plays affects us somewhat and deceives us.

What I worship in kings is the crowd of their worshippers. All deference and submission is due to them, except that of the understanding. My reason was not made for bending and bowing, my knees were. . . .

One day when Antisthenes urged the Athenians to command that their donkeys be used for tilling the fields, as their horses were, he was told that donkeys were not born for such a service. ‘That doesn’t matter’, he retorted. ‘You just have to give the order; for the ignorant and incompetent men you put in command of your wars suddenly become most worthy of command because you employ them for it.’

[Now a paragraph on peoples—notably the Mexicans—who downright worship their kings, crediting them with keeping rivers flowing, the sun shining, and so on.]

I differ from this common fashion of inferring worth from rank, and I most doubt a man’s ability when I see it accompanied by greatness of fortune and public esteem. We should bear in mind how much of an advantage it is to a man to be able to speak when he wants to, to choose the right moment, to break off the discussion or switch the subject with the authority of a master, to defend himself against objections with a shake of the head, a smile or a silence, in the presence of a company that trembles with reverence and respect. . . .

In debates and discussions, when someone says something that we think is good we should not immediately accept it as his own work. Most men are rich with other men’s abilities. A man may make a fine remark, a good reply or a pithy saying, advancing it without recognising its force. ^[C] That we do not *grasp* everything we *borrow* can doubtless be proved from my own case! ^[B] We should not always give way to it, no matter what beauty or truth it may have. We should either seriously attack it or else, under pretence of not understanding it, retreat a little in order to feel out on all sides how it is lodged in its author. It can happen that we run onto the point of his sword, helping his blow to carry beyond his reach.

Sometimes when pressed by necessity in the duel of words I have made counter-attacks that struck home more than I ever hoped or expected. . . . Just as in a dispute with a vigorous man I enjoy anticipating his conclusions; I save him the labour of explaining himself; I try to foretell his ideas while they are still unfinished and being formed (the order and competence of his intelligence warn and threaten me from afar); so also with those others—the ones I suspect

of parroting without understanding.—I do just the opposite; we should understand nothing of what they say except what they explain, and we shouldn't presuppose anything about it. If they judge in general terms—"This is good; that is not"—and get it right, find out whether it is luck that gets it right for them. ^[C] Make them circumscribe and restrict their verdict a little: 'Why is it so? How is it so?'

·GENERALITY AS A COVER FOR STUPIDITY·

These general judgements that I find so common say nothing. They are like those who greet people as a mass or a crowd. Those who truly know them greet them by name and distinguish them as individuals. But getting down to details is risky: I have seen it happen, more than daily, that someone whose mind has a weak foundation tries to play clever by pointing out some beautiful detail in the book he is reading, making such a bad choice of something to admire that instead of revealing the excellence of the author he reveals his own ignorance.

After hearing a whole page of Virgil it is safe to exclaim 'Now *that* is beautiful!' The shrewd ones play safe in that way. But to undertake to follow a good author line by line, trying to indicate with precise and selected examples where he surpasses himself and where he rises high, doing this by weighing the words, the sentences, and the inventions one after another—don't try that! 'We should not only examine what each one says, but also what he thinks and why he thinks it' [Cicero].

Every day I hear stupid people say things that are not stupid. ^[B] They say something good; let us discover how deeply they understand it, let us see where they got it from. We help them to *use* that fine saying or that fine reasoning, which they don't own but are only looking after. They will probably have come out with it by accident, gropingly; we

then give it authority and value for them. You are lending them a hand. What for? They are not grateful to you for it and it makes them all the more clumsy. Do not support them; let them go; they will handle that material like men who fear getting scalded; they dare not change its setting or its lighting, or go into it more deeply. Shake it ever so little and it slips away from them; they leave it to you, strong and fine as it is. They—the good sayings of stupid people—are fine weapons, but badly shafted. How often I have seen this by experience!

Now, if you clarify and confirm what such people say, they promptly take advantage of your interpretation and rob you of it: 'That's what I meant to say', 'That is exactly my understanding of it', 'If I didn't put it that way, it was only because I couldn't find the right words'. Bluster! We should not be gentle in punishing such arrogant stupidity. ^[C] The doctrine of Hegesias that we should neither hate nor blame but instruct is right elsewhere but not here. ^[B] It is not right or humane to help a man to get up who doesn't know how to use your help and who is all the worse for it. I like to let them sink deeper in the mire—so deeply that, if it is possible, they recognise themselves at last.

Stupidity and senselessness are not curable by a single admonition. ^[C] Of that sort of repair work we can properly say what Cyrus replied to the man who urged him to give an exhortation to his troops on the point of battle, namely that men are not made courageous warriors on the spot by a good harangue, any more than one can become a good musician by hearing a good song. There are apprenticeships that must be served in advance by long and sustained education.

^[B] We owe this care—this assiduity in correcting and instructing—to our own folk; but to go preaching at the first passer-by, and to play schoolmaster to the ignorance or clumsiness of the first man we come across, is a practice

I greatly dislike. I rarely do it even during discussions I am involved in; I would rather give up on the whole thing than resort to such remote and pedantic lecturing. ^[C] My nature is not suitable, in speaking or in writing, for beginners. ^[B] But however false or absurd I judge things to be that are said in company, I never leap in to interrupt them by word or gesture.

Moreover, nothing in stupidity annoys me more than its being more pleased with itself than any reasonableness could reasonably be. It is unfortunate that wisdom forbids you to be satisfied with yourself and trust yourself, and always sends you away discontented and anxious, whereas obstinacy and recklessness fill their hosts with joy and assurance. It is the least able men who look always look back at others over their shoulders as they return from the fray full of glory and cheer. And this arrogance of language and gaiety of countenance usually win them victory in the eyes of the bystanders, who are generally weak in and unable to make good judgments about who won the argument. ^[C] Obstinacy and heat of opinion is the surest proof of animal-stupidity. Is there anything as certain, resolute, disdainful, contemplative, grave and serious as an ass?

^[B] Perhaps we may include in the category of conversation and discussion the sharp, abrupt bouts of repartee that happiness and intimacy introduce among friends, bantering and joking wittily and keenly with one another. That is an exercise for which my natural gaiety makes me rather well-suited; and if it isn't as tense and serious as the other exercise I have just been speaking of, it is no less keen and ingenious. . . . For my part, I bring to it more freedom than wit, and have more luck in it than inventiveness; but I am perfect in forbearance, for I put up with retaliation—not

only sharp but even discourteous—without being disturbed. When I am attacked, if I have no brisk response to make on the spot I do not waste my time pursuing the point with boring argumentativeness akin to stubbornness. I let it pass, and cheerfully lowering my ears postpone my revenge to a better time. No merchant wins in every deal. . . .

In this cheerful verbal fencing we sometimes pluck those secret strings of one another's imperfections that we cannot *touch* without offence when we are calm; usefully, we warn each other of each other's faults.

There are other games, played by hand and not by voice, thoughtless and harsh in the French manner, which I mortally hate. I am touchy and sensitive about such things: in my lifetime I have seen two princes of our royal blood laid in their graves because of them.¹ ^[C] It is an ugly thing to fight in play.

·BORROWING·

^[B] Another matter. When I want to judge someone, I ask him to what extent he is satisfied with himself, what in his sayings and doings pleases him. I want him to avoid those fine excuses:

- 'I was only playing at it',
- 'It was taken off the anvil only half-finished' [Ovid],
- 'I spent less than an hour on it',
- 'I have not seen it since'.

Well, then, I say: let us leave those pieces aside. Show me something that represents you entirely, something by which you are happy to be measured. And then: What do you think is finest in your work? Is it this part or that? Is it the charm, or the subject-matter, or the originality, or the judgement, or the erudition? For I notice that men are ordinarily as wrong in judging their own work as other people's, not only

¹ [Henry II was killed while jousting; Henry, Marquess of Beaupréau died of wounds received in a tournament.]

because their feelings are involved but also because they lack the ability to understand it and to analyse it. The work itself, by its own power and fortune, can favour the author beyond his inventiveness and knowledge; it can outrun him.

There is no work that I can judge with less certainty than my own: the Essays I place—very hesitantly and with little assurance—sometimes low, sometimes high.

Many books are useful for their subject-matter; their authors derive little glory from them. And there are good books which—like good works of other kinds—shame the workman. I may

- write about our style of feasting, about our clothing, writing it gracelessly;
- publish contemporary edicts and the letters of princes that pass into the hands of the public without displaying any talent in doing this;
- make an abridgement of a good book that is then lost (and every abridgement of a good book is a stupid one);

things like that. Posterity will find such compilations extremely useful, but what honour would I get from them except for being lucky? A good proportion of famous books are like that.

When reading Philippe de Commines a few years ago—a very good author, certainly—I noted this remark as uncommon: ‘One should take care not to do such great service to one’s master as to make him unable to reward it justly.’ I should have praised the idea, not him; I came across it in Tacitus not long ago: ‘Benefits are pleasing as long as they seem to be repayable; if they go much beyond that, they are repaid with hatred instead of gratitude.’ [C] And Seneca says vigorously: ‘He who thinks it shameful not to repay does not want there to be any man alive whom he ought to repay.’ Quintus Cicero, in a weaker vein: ‘He who thinks he cannot

repay you can by no means be your friend.’

[B] A man’s subject-matter can give him a reputation for learning and a good memory; but to judge the qualities that are most his own and are the most worthy—the strength and beauty of his soul—one must know what is really his and what is not, and in what is not his how much is due to him in consideration of the selection, disposition, ornamentation and the literary quality of what he had contributed. He may have borrowed the matter and spoiled the form, as often happens. Those of us who have little experience of books, have this problem when we come across some fine example of ingenuity in a modern poet or some strong argument in a preacher: we do not dare [see Glossary] to praise them for it before we have learned from a scholar whether it is their own or someone else’s. Until I have done that I stand on my guard.

•EVALUATING TACITUS•

I have just read through at one go Tacitus’s *Histories* (something that rarely happens to me: it is twenty years since I spent one full hour at a time on a book). . . . I know of no author who combines a chronicle of public events with so much reflection on individual *mœurs* and inclinations. . . . This form of history is by far the most useful. Public events depend more on fortune’s guiding hand; private ones on our own. This—the *Histories* of Tacitus—is more a judgement on historical events than a narration of them. There are more precepts than stories. It is not a book to *read*, it is a book to *study and learn*. It is full of maxims, some right and some wrong. It is a seed-bed of ethical and political arguments to be used—contentfully or as adornment—by those who hold high rank in the managing of the world. He always pleads his case with solid and vigorous reasons, in a pointed and subtle fashion, following the affected style of his

time. (They were so fond of a high style that when they found no point or subtlety in the •things, they borrowed it from the •words.) He is not very different from Seneca; he seems me more meaty; Seneca more sharp. Tacitus can more properly serve a sickly troubled nation, as our own is at present; you would often say it is *us* he describing and decrying. [Then a paragraph saying that Tacitus is uncharacteristically unfair in his account of Pompey's character.]

That his narratives are sincere and straightforward can perhaps be argued from the very fact that they do not exactly fit his concluding judgements. He is led to these judgments by the bias he has taken, which often concerns things that lie outside the narrative evidence he provides us with. He has not deigned to slant this evidence even slightly, which explains the failure of fit, and why that failure shows the sincerity of the narrations. He needs no defence for having assented to the religion of his day, in accordance with the laws requiring him to do so, and for being ignorant of the true religion. That is his misfortune, not his fault.

I have chiefly been considering his judgement, and am not entirely clear about it in every instance. For example, take these words from the letter sent to the Senate by the aged ailing Tiberius:

'What shall I write to you, sirs, or how shall I write to you, or shall I *not* write to you at this time? I know that I am daily nearing death; may the gods and goddesses make my end worse if I know what to write.'

I do not see why Tacitus so confidently ascribes this to a poignant remorse tormenting Tiberius's conscience; at least when I encountered that passage I saw no such thing.

It also seemed to me a bit weak of him when he had to mention that he had once held an honourable magistracy in Rome to explain defensively that he was not *boasting* about

this. This seems to me rather shoddy for a soul of his kind. For not daring to talk roundly of oneself shows some lack of heart. A stout and lofty judgment which judges surely and soundly uses its own examples on all occasions, as well as those of others, and testifies frankly about itself as well as about others. Those everyday rules of etiquette should be passed over in favour of truth and freedom.

[C] I dare [see Glossary] not only to talk about myself but to talk *only* about myself. When I write of anything else I am wandering off the point and depriving myself of my subject-matter. I do not love myself so indiscriminately, nor am I so bound to and involved in myself that I cannot distinguish and consider myself separately, like a neighbour or a tree. It is as much a fault not to see how far one's worth extends as to report it as extending further than one can see. We owe more love to God than to ourselves, and we know him less, yet talk about him till we are glugged.

[B] If Tacitus's writings tell us anything about his character, he was a great man, upright and courageous, whose virtue was not of the superstitious kind but philosophical and magnanimous. You could find some of his testimony rather rash [examples are given of reports of two miracles]. In such cases he was following the dutiful example of all good historians who keep a chronicle of important happenings: included among public events are popular rumours and opinions. Their role is to give an account of popular beliefs, not to account for them. The latter part is played by theologians and philosophers, directors of consciences. That is why his fellow-historian, as great a man as he was, most wisely said: 'I do indeed pass on more than I believe; for I cannot affirm things that I doubt, or suppress what I have heard' [Quintus Curtius]. [C] And this other: 'These things are neither to be vouched for nor denied: we must abide by reports' [Livius]. Writing in an age in which belief in miracles was on

the wane, Tacitus says that he nevertheless does not want to neglect to include in his *Annals*, and so provide a foothold for, things accepted by so many decent people with so great a reverence for antiquity. ^[B] That—the passage quoted from Quintus Curtius—is very well said. Let them deliver history to us more according to what they receive than according to their own estimate.

Though I am monarch of the subject I treat and not accountable for it to anyone, I do not believe everything I say. I often launch out with sallies that I mistrust ^[C] and with verbal subtleties that make me shake my ears; ^[B] but I let them run free to take their chance. ^[C] I see that reputations are gained from such things. It is not for me alone to judge them. I present myself standing up and lying down, from front and back, from right and left, and in all my natural postures. ^[B] Even minds alike in power are not always alike in application and taste. . . .

9. Vanity

^[B] There is perhaps there no more obvious vanity than writing so vainly about it. [For 'vanity' and 'vain(ly)', see Glossary.] What the divinity has so divinely expressed about it¹ ought to be carefully and continuously meditated by people with understanding. Who doesn't see that I have set out on a road that I shall travel along, without stopping and without effort, for as long as the world has ink and paper? I cannot keep a record of my life by my actions; fortune places them too low ·for that·; I keep it by my thoughts. I knew a gentleman who gave knowledge of his life only by the workings of his belly; you would see on display at his home a week's worth of chamber-pots. He thought about them, talked about them;

for him any other topic stank.

Here you have (a little more decently) the droppings of an old mind, now hard, now loose, and always undigested. And when shall I make an end of describing the continual agitation and change in my thoughts, whatever subject they happen on, given that Diomedes filled six thousand books with the sole subject of grammar?. . . .

A certain Galba in days gone by was criticised for living in idleness. He replied that everyone should have to account for his actions but not for his leisure. He was wrong, for justice has authority over those who are on holiday.

But the law ought to impose restraints on silly useless writers as it does on vagabonds and idlers. Then I and a hundred others would be banished from the hands of our people. This is not a joke. Scribbling seems to be a symptom of an unruly age. When did we write as much as ·we have· since our dissensions began? When did the Romans write as much as they did at the time of their downfall?. . . . This idle occupation arises from the fact that everyone goes about the duties of his vocation slackly and takes time off.

Each one of us contributes individually to the corruption of the age: the more powerful contribute treachery, injustice, irreligion, tyranny, avarice, cruelty; the weaker—who include me—provide stupidity, vanity and idleness. When harmful things are weighing down on us, it seems to be the season for vain ones. In an age when wickedness is so common, doing what is merely useless is virtually praiseworthy. I console myself with the thought that I shall be one of the last they will have to lay hands on. While they are dealing with the more urgent cases, I shall have time to improve. For it seems to me that it would be contrary to reason to punish minor offences while we are infested by great ones. The physician

¹ [A reference to *Ecclesiastes* 1:2.]

Philotimus recognised the symptoms of an ulcerated lung from the features and breath of a patient who brought him his finger to be dressed. ‘My friend,’ he said, ‘this is not the time for you to worry about fingernails!’

Still on this topic: I saw some years ago an important man whom I remember with special esteem, in the midst of our great disorders—when there was no justice, or law, or magistrate doing his duty, any more than there is today—publicly proposed some puny reforms or other in dress, cookery, and legal procedure. These are tidbits on which an ill-governed people is fed, to show that they are not entirely forgotten. Others do the same when they focus on prohibiting certain ways of speaking, dancing and playing, for a people sunk in detestable vices of every kind. When one has caught a real fever, that is not the time to wash and clean up. . . .

As for me, I have this other worse habit: if one of my shoes is askew then I let my shirt and my cloak lie askew as well; I scorn reforming half-way. When my condition is bad I cling violently to my misfortune; I abandon myself to despair and let myself slip towards the precipice. . . . I persist in growing worse, and think myself no longer worth my care. Either entirely in good condition or entirely in bad.

It is a boon for me that the desolation of this ·French· state coincides with the desolation of the age I have reached. It is easier for me to accept that my ills are increased by it than that such good things as I have should be troubled by it. The words I utter when wretched are words of defiance; instead of lying low, my courage bristles up. Unlike others, I find myself more devout in good fortune than in bad, following Xenophon’s precept, though not his reasoning, and am more ready to make sheep’s eyes at heaven in thanksgiving than in supplication. I am more anxious to improve my health when it smiles on me than to restore it when we have parted company; prosperous times discipline

instruct me, as rods and adversities do others. ^[C] As though good fortune were incompatible with a good conscience, men never become moral except when fortune is bad. ^[B] For me good fortune is a singular spur to moderation and modesty. Entreaty wins me over, threat repels me; ^[C] favour makes me bow; fear makes me stiffen.

^[B] Among human characteristics this one is common enough: **a** to be better pleased with other people’s things than with our own, and **b** to love movement and change: ‘Even the daylight pleases us only because the hours run by on changing steeds’ [Petronius]. **a** I have my share of that. Those who go to the other extreme, who are happy with themselves, who esteem what they possess above all else and who recognise no form as more beautiful than the one they see, if they are not wiser than us they are truly happier. I do not envy their wisdom but I do their good fortune.

·TRAVEL·

b This greedy appetite for new and unknown things helps to foster in me the desire to travel, though plenty of other circumstances contribute to it. I gladly turn aside from governing my household. There is a certain satisfaction in being in command, even if only of a barn, and in being obeyed by one’s people; but it is too monotonous and listless a pleasure. Also, it is inevitably mingled with many troublesome thoughts. You are distressed when your tenants suffer from famine, when your neighbours quarrel among themselves or encroach on you: ‘Either the hail has ravaged your vineyards, or the soil deceives your hopes, or your fruit trees are lashed by the rain, or the sun scorches your fields. And there are the rigours of winter’ [Horace]. And the fact that barely once in six months will God send you weather which totally satisfies your steward and which if it is good for the vines does not harm the meadows. . . .

Then there is that shoe of the man of yore: new and shapely, but pinching the foot;¹ no outsider ever understands how much it costs you, and how much it takes out of you, to keep up that appearance of order to be seen in your household, which perhaps you have bought too dearly. I came late to the management of a household. Those whom nature had given birth to before me long relieved me of that burden. I had already acquired a different bent, one more suitable to my disposition. Still, from what I have seen of it, it is an occupation more tiresome than difficult; anyone who has the ability to do other things can easily do *this*. . . . Since I [C] aim only to acquire the reputation for having acquired nothing, and squandered nothing either (in conformity with the rest of my life, which is as ill-suited to doing evil as good), and [B] since I seek only to get by, I can do it, thank God, without paying much attention.

'If worst comes to worst, forestall poverty by cutting down expenses.' That is what I try to do, changing my ways before poverty compels me to. Meanwhile I have established enough gradations in my soul to allow me to do with less than I have—and I mean contentedly. [C] 'Your degree of wealth is to be measured not by your income but by your manner of living and your culture' [Cicero]. [B] My real need does not so wholly take up all that I have that fortune has nothing of mine to sink its teeth into without biting into the flesh.

My presence ·in my household·, ignorant and uninterested though it is, give a strong shove to domestic affairs. I do take part in them, though grudgingly. And you can say this for me at home: while I do burn my end of the candle privately ·and moderately·, the other end does not have to cut down on anything.

[C] My travels hurt me only by their expense, which is considerable and exceeds my resources. Used as I am to travel with a retinue that doesn't merely meet my *needs* but does me *honour*, I have to make my journeys shorter and less frequent, spending only the froth of my savings, temporising and postponing as the money comes in. I will not have the pleasure of wandering spoil the pleasure of repose; on the contrary, I intend them to feed and favour one another. Fortune has helped me in that; my chief aim in this life has been to live it comfortably and in a relaxed rather than a busy way, and fortune has spared me the need to multiply my riches to provide for a multitude of heirs. . . . Following the example of Phocion, each man provides enough for his children if he provides for them insofar as they are not unlike himself. I emphatically don't endorse what Crates did: he left his money with a banker, with this condition: if his children were fools, the money should be given to them; but if they turned out to be clever, it should be distributed among the simpletons in the populace. As if fools are better able to use money because they're less able to do without it!

[B] At all events, the harm that comes from my absence ·from my household affairs· does not seem to me to warrant my refusing to accept—as long as I can afford to—the opportunities that come up to turn away from the troubles involved in being present ·in them·. Something is always going awry. The affairs now of this house, now of that, pester you. You pry into everything too closely; your sharp-sightedness hurts you here, as it does often enough elsewhere. I avoid occasions for annoyance, and turn away from learning about the things that are going wrong; yet not so thoroughly that I don't keep bumping into things that displease me in my

¹ [This refers to a story by Plutarch: a Roman who has divorced his wife is defending himself against friends who say that she faithful, beautiful, and fruitful; he holds out his shoe, saying that it is new and well-made, but 'None of you can tell where it pinches me.']

home. ^[C]And the knaveries they hide from me are the ones I know best. There are some that one has to help to conceal from oneself so that they hurt less! ^[B]Vain pinpricks—^[C]vain sometimes but always pinpricks. ^[B]The slightest and pettiest cuts are the most piercing; just as small print hurts and tires the eyes most, so do small concerns sting us most. . . .

^[C]I am no philosopher. Evils crush me in proportion to their weight, and their weight depends as much on their form as on their their matter, often more. I have more experience of them than common people do, so I bear them better. In short, they weigh with me if they do not hurt me.

Life is a delicate thing, easy to disturb. From the moment I am inclined to bad humour—^[C]‘No-one can stop himself once he yields to the first impulse’ [Seneca]—^[B]however stupid the cause that brought me to be so, I goad my humour in that direction. Then it nourishes itself, provoking itself under its own impetus, drawing to itself and piling up matter upon matter to feed on. ‘Water dripping drop by drop makes fissures in a stone’ [Lucretius]. These everyday drippings eat into me. ^[C]Everyday irritations are never slight. They are constant and irremediable, particularly when they arise from household cares, which are constant and unavoidable.

^[B]When I consider my affairs from a distance and as a whole, I find—perhaps because my memory of them is hardly exact—that until now they have prospered beyond my projections or calculations. It seems to me that I get more out of them than is in them; their happy state misleads me. But once I am involved in the job and watching the progress of all the details. . . , a thousand things give me reason to desire and fear. It is very easy for me to abandon them completely; dealing with them without worrying I find very difficult. It is wretched to be in a place where everything you see makes work for you and concerns you. It seems to me that I am happier enjoying the pleasures of someone’s

else’s house, and that I bring a more innocent taste to them. ^[C]When asked what kind of wine he thought best, Diogenes replied in my vein, ‘Oher people’s’.

^[B]My father loved building at Montaigne, where he was born; and in all this management of domestic affairs I like to follow his example and his rules, and I’ll bind my successors to them as far as I can. If I could do better for him I would. I glory in the fact that his will is still effective through me. God forbid that I should allow to fail in my hands any semblance of life that I could give to so good a father. Whenever I have taken a hand in completing some old section of wall or repairing some botched bit of building, it has certainly been more out of regard for his intention than for my satisfaction. ^[C]And I reproach my own laziness for not having gone on to complete the fine things he started in his house, especially since I am likely to be the last of my stock to own it and put the finishing touches on it.

^[B]As for my own inclinations, neither the pleasures of building (which are supposed to be so attractive) nor of hunting nor of laying out gardens, nor the other pleasures of life in the country, can entertain me much. I think ill of myself for this, as I do for all opinions that are disadvantageous to me. I do not so much care about having vigorous and informed opinions as having easy ones that are convenient to live with; ^[C]they are true and sound enough if they are useful and pleasing.

^[B]Some people, when they hear me declare my incompetence in household occupations, whisper in my ears that I am guilty of disdain, and that I neglect to learn

- what tools are used in farming,
- its seasons and succession of tasks,
- how my wines are made,
- how grafting is done,
- the names and shapes of plants and fruits,

- the ways of preparing them for the table, and
- ^[C] the names and prices of the materials I wear,

^[B] because my mind is full of some higher knowledge. They do me mortal wrong. What they accuse me of would be silly, stupid rather than vainglorious. I would rather be a good horseman than a good logician: ‘Why do you not do something useful, like making baskets of wickerwork or pliant reeds?’ [Virgil].

^[C] We confuse our thoughts with generalities, universal causes and processes that proceed quite well without us, and leave behind our own concerns and Michel [i.e. this or that individual person], who touches us more intimately than *man* ·in general· does.

^[B] Now, I do remain at home most of the time; but I wish I were happier there than elsewhere: ‘May it be my final haven when I am weary of the sea, of roaming and of war’ [Horace]. I do not know whether I shall accomplish this. I wish that my father had bequeathed to me, instead of some other part of his inheritance, the passionate love for his household that he had in his old age. He was most successful in limiting his desires to his means, and in being content with what he had. Political philosophy can, for all I care, condemn me for the lowliness and sterility of my occupation, if only I can once acquire a taste for it, as he did. I do believe that the most honourable vocation is to serve the public and to be useful to many. ^[C] ‘The fruits of intellect and virtue and of all outstanding talents are best employed when shared with one’s neighbour’ [Cicero]. ^[B] For my part, I stay out of that, partly from self-awareness (which enables me to see the weight attached to such employments and what little qualification I have for them). . . . and partly from laziness. I am content to enjoy the world without being all wrapped up in it and to lead a life that rises only to the level of being excusable, of not being a burden to myself or to others.

No man ever entrusted himself more fully and passively into the care and control of someone else than I would do if I had someone ·for this purpose·. One of my wishes now would be to find a son-in-law who would spoon-feed my final years and lull them to sleep, into whose hands I could resign the control and use of my goods, with complete authority to do with them as I do, getting out of them what I do—provided that he brought to this a truly grateful and loving affection. Well, yes, but we live in a world where the loyalty of one’s own children is unknown.

Whoever has my purse when I travel has full charge of it without supervision. He could cheat me just as well if I kept accounts; and unless he is a devil, my reckless trust obliges him to be honest. ^[C] ‘Many by their fear of being cheated have taught others to cheat, and have justified their wrong-by throwing suspicion on them’ [Seneca]. ^[B] The surety I most usually have for my servants is my own ignorance. I never assume defects until I have seen them, and I trust the young more, reckoning that they are less corrupted by bad example. I would rather hear after two months that I have spent 400 crowns than have my ears battered every evening with 3, 5, or 7. Yet I have been as little robbed as anyone by larcenies of that kind. True, I lend my ignorance a helping hand. I deliberately keep my knowledge of my money somewhat vague and uncertain; up to a point, I am pleased to be unsure about it. You should leave your manservant a little room for improvidence or dishonesty. If it leaves enough for us to do our business, let us allow the surplus of fortune’s liberality to flow on as fortune chooses. . . . Oh, what a servile and silly care is care for your money, loving to handle it, weigh it, count it over! That is the way avarice makes its advances.

In eighteen years I have been managing an estate, I have not managed to persuade myself to look into title-deeds

or into my principal affairs which ought to pass within my knowledge and attention. This is not a philosophical contempt for transitory and mundane things; my taste is not as purified as that, and I do not value such things at less than their worth. But it certainly is inexcusable and childish laziness and negligence. ^[C] What would I not do rather than read a contract, rather than shake those dusty piles of papers, a slave to my affairs; or, even worse, a slave to other people's, as many folk are paid to be! For me nothing is expensive save toil and worry: all I want is to slump nonchalantly.

^[B] I was better fitted, I think, for living off the fortune of others, if that could be done without obligation and without servitude. And when I look at it closely, I am not sure whether, for a man of my temperament and situation, what I have to put up with from business and agents and servants does not involve more degradation, bother and bitterness than there would be in following a man born greater than myself who would lead me in some sort of comfort. . . .

When Crates, to rid himself of the cares and indignities of his home, jumped into the freedom of poverty, he made things worse. I would never do that (I hate poverty as much as pain), but I would indeed exchange that first sort of existence for another less grand and less busy.

When I am away from home I strip off all such thoughts; I would then feel less if a tower collapsed than I feel, when I am there, the fall of a tile. Once I am away, my soul easily achieves detachment; when I am there, it frets like a wine-grower's. ^[C] A twisted rein on my horse or a stirrup-strap knocking against my leg can put me out of humour for an entire day. . . .

^[B] I am responsible when anything goes wrong at home. There are few masters—I mean of my middle station—who can rely on anyone else without retaining most of the load. If

there are *any*, they are luckier than I am. That ^[C] somewhat detracts from the way I treat visitors (though I may have made the odd one stay on, as bores do, more for my cuisine than for my charm); and it ^[B] considerably detracts from the pleasure I ought to take in visits and gatherings of friends in my house.

A gentleman in his own home never looks so stupid as when he is seen to be preoccupied with the arrangements, having a word in a manservant's ear or threatening another with his eyes. The arrangements should flow unnoticed and seem like a normal process. And I find it ugly to discuss with your guests the way you are treating them, whether to excuse it or to boast of it.

I love order and cleanliness—I see my reflection in tankard and plate' [Horace]—as much as abundance; in my house I give careful attention to what is needful, little to ostentation.

When you are in someone else's house, if a servant brawls or a dish is spilled you simply laugh; you sleep while the master arranges with his butler tomorrow's arrangements for your entertainment.

^[C] I am speaking only for myself, not failing to appreciate what a pleasant occupation it is for certain natures to run their households quietly and prosperously, all done with regularity and order. I do not wish to attribute my own mistakes and shortcomings to the thing itself, or to contradict Plato's contention that the happiest occupation for any man is to manage his private concerns without injustice.

^[B] When I travel, I have to think only of me—and the use of my money (and one command can see to that). To accumulate money, too many talents are needed; I know nothing about all that. I know a little about spending and about making a good show of my expenditure—which is indeed its principal use. But I strive too ambitiously over it,

which makes my spending uneven and shapeless, as well as being immoderate in both directions. If it makes a show, and is useful, I let myself be carried away injudiciously; and just as injudiciously I close up tight if it does not shine and does not please me.

Whether it is art or nature that stamps on us this disposition to live with reference to others, it does us much more harm than good. We defraud ourselves of our legitimate advantages in order to conform our appearances to the common opinion. We care less about what we are in ourselves and in actuality than about how we are perceived by the public. Even the joys of the mind, and wisdom, strike us as fruitless if we enjoy them by ourselves, not parading them before the approving eyes of others.

There are men whose gold flows in great streams through great caverns underground; others spread theirs out into sheets and leaf; so that for some farthings are worth crowns, for others the reverse; *·actual* value doesn't come into it—because the world judges means and value by the show they put on.

All anxious care about riches smells of avarice, as do spending when it is too systematic and generosity when it is too contrived. They are not worth troublesome attention and care. Anyone who wants to make his expenditure just right makes it constricted and confined. Keeping and spending are in themselves indifferent; they take on the colour of good or evil only according to how we apply our wills to them.

The other cause that invites me to travel is my dissent from the *mœurs* of our country. As regards the public interest, I could console myself for this corruption. . . ., but with regard to my own interests, No. I in particular suffer from it too much. For in my neighbourhood the prolonged

licence of our civil wars has already hardened us to a form of government that is so riotous—'Where right and wrong are interchanged' [Virgil]—that it is a miracle that it can survive. 'Men bear arms while ploughing the fields, thinking only of grabbing fresh plunder and living by rapine' [Virgil].

In short I see from our example that human society remains cobbled and held together, whatever the cost. No matter what position you place them in, men will jostle into heaps and arrange themselves in piles, just as ill-matched objects dumped into a sack find their own way of fitting together better than art could ever arrange them. King Philip made a pile from the most wicked and depraved men he could find, and settled them all in a city that bore their name.¹ I reckon that out of their very vices they wove for themselves a political fabric and an advantageous lawful society.

It is not one deed that I see, not three, not a hundred, but *mœurs* now commonly accepted that are so monstrous—in their inhumanity and above all in their treachery (which is for me the worst kind of vice)—that I have not the heart to think of them without horror; and I marvel at them almost as much as I detest them.

The practice of these dreadful villainies bears the mark of vigour and power in the soul as much as of error and unruliness. Necessity reconciles men and brings them together. Afterwards, that fortuitous bond is codified into laws; for there have been societies as savage as any human opinion can produce that have nevertheless kept their structures with as much health and longevity as those of Plato and Aristotle could do. And indeed all those fictional and artificial accounts of government turn out to be ridiculous and unfit to be put into practice. Those long solemn debates about the

¹ [Poneropolis, Greek for 'city of the wicked'.]

best form of society and the laws most suitable for bonding us together are *useless* except as mental exercise. Several of our arts disciplines are like that: their *essence* is controversy and dispute; they have no life apart from that.

Such accounts of government would be appropriate in a new-made world; but we take men who are already fashioned by and bound to particular customs; we don't *beget* them anew. . . . Whatever power we have to correct them and set them up afresh, we can hardly wrench them out of their accustomed bent without destroying everything. Solon was asked whether he had drawn up the very best laws he could for the Athenians: 'Yes indeed,' he replied, 'the best of those they would have accepted.' [C] Varro pleaded a similar excuse: if he had to write on religion as something new he would say what he believed, but since it is already fashioned and accepted, he will talk about it following custom rather than nature [i.e. rather than following the facts].

·AGAINST THE DESIRE FOR INNOVATION IN GOVERNMENT·

[B] Not in theory but in truth: the best and most excellent government for each nation is the one under which it has been sustained. Its form and essential fitness depend on custom. We are apt to be displeased with the present state of affairs. But I nevertheless hold that to yearn for an oligarchy in a democracy, or for another form of government in a monarchy, is wrong and stupid. . . .

Nothing presses a state hard except innovation: change alone provides the mould for injustice and tyranny. When some part works loose we can prop it up; we can resist being swept away from our beginnings and our principles by the spoiling and the corruption natural to all things. But to undertake to recast such a huge lump, to change the foundations of so great an edifice, is a task for those for whom cleaning ·a picture· means effacing ·it·, who want

to reform individual defects by universal disorder and to cure illnesses by death. . . . The world is clumsy at curing itself: it is so impatient of its affliction that it aims only at breaking loose from it without counting the cost. We know from hundreds of examples that it normally cures itself at its own expense. Getting rid of a present evil is no cure unless the general condition is improved. . . . [C] Anyone who proposes merely to remove what is biting him falls short, for good does not necessarily succeed evil. Another evil can succeed it—as happened to Caesar's killers who threw the republic into such a state that they had reason to regret interfering with it. The same has happened to many others down to our own times. My own contemporaries here in France could tell you a thing or two about that! All great revolutions shake the state and throw it into disorder.

Anyone who was aiming straight for a cure, and *reflected* on it before taking action, would soon cool off about setting his hand to it. Pacuvius Calavius corrected what is wrong in that procedure ·of aiming straight for a cure without thinking about means and consequences·, by providing a notable example. His fellow-citizens were in revolt against their magistrates. A person of great authority in the city of Capua, he found one day the means of locking the Senate in their palace; calling the citizens together in the marketplace he told them that the time had come when they were fully at liberty to take their revenge on the tyrants who had so long oppressed them and were now in his power, isolated and disarmed. His advice was that these men should be brought out one at a time, by lot, and that the citizens should decide about each one individually, and that if he was condemned he should be executed on the spot; provided that they should at the same time decide to put some honourable man in the place of the condemned one, so that the office should not remain vacant. No sooner had they heard the name

of the first Senator than there arose shouts of universal disapproval. 'Yes, I see' said Pacuvius 'that we shall have to get rid of that one; he is a wicked man; let us have a good one in his place.' There was an immediate silence, everyone being at a loss over whom to choose. The first man rash enough to name his choice was met with an even greater unanimity of voices to refuse his candidate, citing a hundred defects and just causes for rejecting him. As those opposing humours grew heated, the cases of the second and third senators fared even worse, with as much discord over the elections as agreement over the rejections! Having uselessly exhausted themselves in this quarrel they gradually began to slip out of the meeting—one this way, another that—each going off convinced in his mind that an older, better-known evil is always more bearable than a new and untried one.

^[B] Although I see we are in pitiful disarray (for what have we not done?)—

'We are, alas, disgraced by scars and crimes and fratricide. In this cruel age, what atrocities have we not committed? Have our young men ever stayed their hand for fear of the gods? What altar have they spared?' [Horace]

—I do not immediately jump to the conclusion that 'Even if the goddess Safety *wanted* to save this family, she *could not* do so' [Terence]. Perhaps we are not on our last legs, for all that. The preservation of states is probably something that surpasses our understanding. ^[C] As Plato says, a civil government is a strong thing that is hard to dissolve. It often holds out against mortal internal diseases, against the injury of unjust laws, against tyranny, against the immorality and ignorance of the magistrates and the licence and sedition of the people.

^[B] In all our fortunes we compare ourselves with what is above us, looking toward those who are better off. Let us

take our measure from what is below: there is no one so ill-fated as not to find hundreds of examples to console him. ^[C] It is our weakness that we are more unhappy to see people ahead of us than happy to see those who trail behind. ^[B] Yet Solon said that if all ills were gathered into a pile, there is nobody who would not rather •take away from that pile the ills he now has than •arrange to divide them equally among all men and take his fair share. Our government is in bad health; yet some have been sicker without dying. The gods play pelota with us, batting us about in every direction: 'To the gods we are indeed like balls to play with' [Plautus].

·THE EXAMPLE OF ROME·

The stars fatally decreed that Rome should be the example of what states are capable of in this way. In it are comprised all the forms and vicissitudes that affect a state, all that order can do, and disorder; all that good fortune can do, and misfortune. Seeing the shocks and agitations that shook Rome and that it survived, what state should despair of its own condition? If the well-being of a state depends upon the extent of its dominions—

which I utterly reject, ^[C] liking as I do what Isocrates taught Nicocles, not to envy rulers who rule over wide dominions but those who know how to keep in good condition the lands they have inherited

—^[B] then Rome was never more healthy than when it was sickest.

One can scarcely recognize the features of any kind of government under the first few emperors: it was the densest and most dreadful confusion that can be conceived. Yet Rome endured it and survived it, preserving (not a single monarchy confined within its own borders, but) all those nations, so diverse, so scattered, so disaffected, so chaotically governed and so unjustly conquered. . . .

All that totters does not collapse. Such a great body holds together by more than a single nail. Its very antiquity can hold it up, like old buildings whose foundations have been worn away by age, without cement or mortar, live and support themselves by their own weight: 'No longer does it cling to the earth with its mighty roots; it is saved by its own weight' [Lucan].

Furthermore, it is not a good procedure to reconnoitre only the flank and the moat; to judge the security of a place one must see from what direction it can be approached and what is the condition of the attacker. Few ships sink of their own weight and without outside violence. Now let us look in all directions: everything is crumbling about us; in all the great states that we know, in Christendom and elsewhere, if you look you'll find a manifest threat of change and collapse. . . . It is easy for the astrologers to warn us of great and imminent changes for the worse; what they foretell is present and palpable: we need not look to the heavens for that!

We should not only *console* ourselves for this universal fellowship in evil and menace, but should derive some *hope* that our state will endure, because naturally when everything falls nothing falls. Universal illness is individual health; uniformity is a quality hostile to disintegration. Personally I am not reduced to despair, and it seems to me that there are ways of saving us. . . .

Who knows whether God won't decide that the same should happen to our states as happens to bodies that are purged and restored to a better condition by long and grievous maladies that bring to them a clearer and fuller health than what they took away?

What gets me down most is that when I count up the symptoms of our malady, I find as many natural ones—as many sent by Heaven and due to it alone—as ones brought

by our disorder and imprudence. [C] It seems that the very stars ordain that we have lasted long enough beyond the normal term. And something else that gets me down is this: the most immediate evil that threatens us is not •change for the worse within the whole solid lump but (our ultimate dread) •its coming apart, falling into pieces.

•FEAR OF MEMORY-LOSS•

[B] In these ramblings of mine, what I fear is that my treacherous memory should make me inadvertently record something twice. I hate going over my writings, and only unwillingly reread something that has been cut loose from myself. Now, I am not bringing in here anything that I have just learned; these are •my• normal ideas. Having perhaps thought of them a hundred times, I am afraid that I may have already mentioned them. Repetition is boring everywhere, even in Homer, but it is ruinous in works that only make a superficial and passing impression. I hate •repetitive• instruction, even in useful things, as in Seneca, [C] and I dislike the practice of his stoic school of repeating copiously and at length, for each individual subject, the principles and postulates that apply over-all, always restating their their common and universal reasons.

[B] My memory is growing cruelly worse every day: 'As though my parched throat had drunk long draughts of the forgetful waters of Lethe' [Horace]. From now on—for nothing has gone wrong so far, thank God—whereas others seek time and opportunity to think over what they have to say, I shall have to avoid any preparation for fear of assuming an obligation that I shall have to rely on. I get lost when I am under an obligation, as I do when I rely on an instrument as feeble as my memory.

I never read the following story without indignation and a personal and natural resentment.

Lyncestes was accused of conspiring against Alexander. On the day that he was brought to appear before the army, as was customary, to be heard in his defence, he had in his head a prepared speech of which, hesitating and stammering, he pronounced a few words. As he became more and more confused, fumbling and struggling with his memory, he was struck dead by blows from the pikes of the soldiers nearest him, who regarded him as convicted. His confusion and his silence was to them as good as a confession: he had plenty of time in prison to prepare himself, it was not his memory that was defective, they thought, but a case of guilt bridling his tongue and making him so feeble.

What a splendid argument! Even when a man merely aims to speak well, he can be dazed by the place, the audience and their expectations. What can he do when it is a speech his life depends on?

For my part, the mere fact of being tied down to what I have to say makes me lose hold of it. When I have wholly committed and entrusted myself to my memory, I lean on it so heavily that I overwhelm it: it takes fright at its load. As long as I rely on it, I place myself outside myself, till I risk fumbling and stumbling. Some days I was hard put it to hide the slavery ·to a prepared speech· in which I was bound, whereas my plan in speaking is always to display extreme carelessness and ·seemingly· casual and unprepared gestures arising from the actual circumstances. For I would as soon •say nothing worthwhile as •show that I have come prepared to make a fine speech—something especially unbecoming for people in my ·military· profession. . . .

I have promised myself never again to accept the task of speaking in formal situations. As for reading from a prepared script, that is not only a monstrosity but greatly to the

disadvantage of those who by nature are capable of managing something impromptu. And as for throwing myself on the mercy of my improvisation, that is even less acceptable: my powers of improvisation are stolid and confused and could never respond to sudden emergencies of any consequence.

·IMPERFECTIONS IN THE *Essays*·

Reader: just let this tentative essay, this third prolongation of my self-portrait, run its course. I add but I do not correct. **a** Firstly, if someone has peddled his work to the world, he no longer—it seems to me—has any rights over it. Let him express himself better elsewhere, if he can, not adulterate the work he has already sold. From such people—i.e. ones who keep wanting to improve their work—nothing should be bought until after they are dead. Let them think about it carefully before publishing. Who is hurrying them?

^[C] My book **is always one**; except that at each reprinting, so that the purchaser won't go away quite empty-handed, I allow myself to tack on some additional ornaments, as though it were merely a piece of badly joined marquetry. That is no more than a little extra thrown in, which does not condemn the original version. . . .

^[B] **b** Secondly, I am afraid of losing by a 'correction'. My understanding does not always go forwards; it goes backwards too. I distrust my present thoughts hardly less than my past ones, and my second or third thoughts hardly less than my first. We often 'correct' ourselves as stupidly as we 'correct' others. ^[C] I first published in the year 1580; in the long stretch of time since then I have grown old but not an inch wiser. Myself now and myself at some other time **are certainly two**, but I have nothing to say about which of the two is better. It would be fine to be old if we travelled only towards improvement. ·But in fact· it is a drunkard's progress, formless, staggering, like reeds that

the wind shakes as it fancies, haphazardly. . . .

[B] The approval of the public has made me a little bolder than I expected; but what I most fear is to surfeit my readers. I would rather irritate them than bore them, as a learned man of my time has done. Praise is always pleasing, from whomever and for whatever reason it comes; but to get genuine delight from it one needs to discover its cause: even defects have ways of finding favour. Common folk rarely make good choices, and in my own time I am mistaken if it is not the worst books that get the best share of popular favour. I am indeed grateful to those honest men [see Glossary] who deign to take my feeble efforts in good part.

Nowhere are defects of style more obvious than when the subject-matter itself has little to commend it. Do not blame me, reader, for the faults that slip in here through the caprice or carelessness of others; each hand, each workman, contributes his own. I do not concern myself with the spelling (merely telling them to follow the old style), or with punctuation: I am expert in neither. When they—my editors—completely destroy my meaning, that does not worry me over-much, for at least they relieve me of some responsibility; but when (as so often happens) they substitute a false meaning and twist me to their own opinion, they ruin me. However, when the thought does not measure up to my standard, an honest man should reject it as not mine. Anyone who knows how little I like to work, and how far I am cast in my own mould, will easily believe that I would rather •dictate as many essays again than •subject myself to going through these ones again to make schoolboy corrections.

. . . . •In my circumstances•, not only am I a deprived of

close contact with people whose *mœurs* and opinions differ from mine and unite them by a bond that allows no other, but also b I am not free from danger among people who think that all deeds are equally lawful, most of whom are prone to the extreme degree of licentiousness because their standing with regard to the law could not be made worse.¹ When I add up all the details that concern me, I find that there is no man hereabouts to whom the defence of our laws costs more than it costs me, 'in gains forgone or damages incurred' (as the law-clerks say). . . .

My house is always open, easily accessible and at anyone's service—

for I have never let myself be persuaded to turn it into a tool for war, which I take part in most willingly when it is furthest from my neighbourhood

—so it has deserved a good deal of popular affection, making it hard •for anyone• to challenge me on my own dunghill. And I think it is a wonderful and exemplary achievement that it is still virgin of blood and pillage, during so long a storm and so many upheavals and changes in the neighbourhood. For, to tell the truth, a man of my disposition could have escaped any constant and continued form of danger; but the conflicting invasions and incursions, and the alternations and vicissitudes of fortune around me, have up to now hardened the temper of the local people rather than softening it, and burdened me with insurmountable dangers and hardships.

•AVOIDING PERSONAL OBLIGATIONS•

I escape, but it displeases me that I do so by fortune, and indeed by my prudence, rather than by justice; it displeases me to be outside the safeguard of the laws and under any

¹ [This sentence reflects the facts that a Montaigne, a catholic, lived surrounded by protestants, and b his locality was the scene of much violence in the long-running civil war.]

protection other than theirs. As things stand, I live more than half by the favour of others, which is a harsh obligation. I do not want to owe my safety to the •bounty and good-will of great men who allow me my legality and liberty, or to the affable *mœurs* of my forebears and of myself. For what if I had been different? And if my conduct and the frankness of my dealings do impose obligations on my neighbours or their allies, there is cruelty in their being able to pay off this debt by •letting me stay alive and •being able to say: 'We allow him ^[C] to continue freely to have divine service in the chapel of his house, now that we have pillaged and smashed all the neighbouring churches; and ^[B] to keep his property and his life, since he protects our wives and our cattle when the need arises.' . . .

Now, I maintain that we ought to live by right and authority, not by ^[C] reward and ^[B] favour. So many gallant men have preferred to lose their life rather than to owe it to anyone! I avoid submitting myself to any sort of obligation, but especially to any that binds me by a debt of honour. For me nothing is as expensive as **a** what is *given* to me and for which my will remains mortgaged under the title of gratitude; I prefer to receive **b** services that are for sale. And rightly so: for **b** the latter I give only money: for **a** the others I give myself. The tie that binds me by the laws of honour seems to me tighter and more oppressive than the tie of civil constraint. A notary ties me down more gently than I do myself. Is it not reasonable that my conscience should be much more firmly bound when anyone has simply *trusted* it. In other cases my fidelity owes nothing, for nothing has been lent to it; let them seek help from the trust and security they have taken independently of me. I would much rather break the restrictions of walls or of laws than those of my word.

^[C] I am scrupulous to the point of superstition in keeping my promises; I prefer to make them uncertain and condi-

tional, whatever they are about. To ones that don't *have* weight I *give* weight by jealous regard for my rule, which torments and burdens me on its own account. Yes, even in undertakings in which I alone am concerned, when I say what I plan to do it seems to me that I have ordered myself to carry it out, and that by letting others into the know I have imposed it on myself. It seems to me that when I *say* what I'll do I *promise* to do it. That is why I do not give much wind of my projects.

^[B] The sentence I pass on myself is sharper and stiffer than that of the judges. They consider me only with respect to common obligation; the grip of my conscience is tighter and more severe. I am lax in performing duties that would be forced on me if I did not accept them voluntarily. ^[C] 'Even a just action is just only in so far as it is voluntary' [Cicero]. ^[B] If the deed has none of the splendour of freedom it has neither grace nor honour. 'You will not easily get me to do what the law says I must' [Terence]. When necessity compels me, I like to slacken my will, 'because when anything is commanded, gratitude is given to the one who issues the order not the one who obeys it' [Valerius Maximus]. I know some who follow this vein to the point of injustice; they would rather give than give back, would rather lend than repay, doing good most meanly to those to whom they are most beholden. I do not go that far, but I get close to it.

I am so fond of throwing off burdens and obligations that I have sometimes counted as profit the ingratitude, affronts and indignities that I had received from people to whom I owed—by nature or accident—some duty of affection, taking their offence as so much towards the settling and discharge of my debt. Although I continue to pay them the courtesies that society requires, I find it a great saving ^[C] to do for justice what I used to do for affection and ^[B] to alleviate a little of the inward stress and anxiety of my will—

^[C] 'Wise men should stop a rush of benevolence as they would a runaway chariot' [^[C]Cicero]

—^[B] which, when I yield to it, is rather too impulsive and pressing, at least for a man who wishes never to be under any pressure; and this economy ·with my friendship· somewhat consoles me for the imperfections of those who are in contact with me. I am really sorry they are less worthy of my friendship; still, in this way I am spared something of my diligence and engagement towards them.

I approve of a man who loves his son less if he is mangy or hunchbacked—

not merely when he is wicked but also when he is ill-favoured and ill-born (for God himself has taken off that much of his natural value and estimation)

—provided he bears himself in his coolness towards him with moderation and scrupulous fairness. In my case, closeness of relationship does not lighten defects; it makes them worse.

After all that, insofar as I understand the subtle and most useful science of beneficence and gratitude, I see no-one more free and under less obligation than I am so far. What I owe, I owe to ordinary and natural obligations. These is no-one more absolutely clear of any others: 'The gifts of powerful men are unknown to me' [^[C]Virgil]. Princes ^[C] give me plenty if they take nothing from me, and ^[B] do me enough good if they do me no harm. That is all I ask of them. Oh, how obliged I am to God that it was his pleasure that I should receive all I have directly from his grace, and that all my debt should be to him alone! ^[C] How earnestly I beseech his holy mercy that I may never owe a fundamental 'Thank you' to any man! Blessed freedom, which has guided me thus far! May it continue to the end!

^[B] I try to have no express need of anyone. . . . This is something that anyone can do for himself, but it is easier for those whom God has protected from urgent natural

necessities. It is pitiful and hazardous to depend on someone else. Even our own selves (which are our most proper and secure resource) do not provide adequate security. I own nothing but myself, and even my possession of that is partly defective and borrowed. I cultivate myself—^[C] both my fortune and (the stronger assistant) my courage—^[B] so as to find there the wherewithal to satisfy me if everything else should abandon me. ^[C] Hippias of Elis not only

- furnished himself with learning, so as to be able in case of need to withdraw cheerfully from all other company into the lap of the Muses, and
- learned philosophy, so as to teach his soul to be content with itself, manfully doing without all external goods when fate so ordains; but also
- carefully learned to be his own cook and barber, to make his own clothes, shoes and rings, so as to be as self-sufficient as he could and to escape from dependence on outside help.

^[B] One enjoys more freely and cheerfully the use of borrowed goods when one's enjoyment of them is not forced and constrained by necessity, and one has in one's **a** will and one's **b** fortune the **a** strength and the **b** means to do without them.

^[C] I know myself well, but it is hard for me to imagine anyone's liberality so pure, any hospitality so free and genuine, that it would not seem to me ill-favoured, tyrannical and stained with reproach if I had become involved in it out of necessity. Just as giving is an ambitious quality, so also receiving is a quality of subordination. . . . [He gives two examples of monarchs who were angered when gifts were brought to them.]

. . . .A man I see so freely making use of one and all, and putting himself under obligation to them, would not do this if he weighed the bond of an obligation as carefully as a

wise man should: perhaps it is sometimes paid, but it is never dissolved. Cruel fetters for anyone who likes to give his freedom elbow-room in all directions.

Those who know me, both above and below me, know whether they have ever seen a man less demanding of others. If I am like that beyond all modern examples, that is no great marvel, since many elements in my *mœurs* contribute to it:

- a little natural pride,
- inability to endure refusal,
- limitedness of my desires and designs,
- clumsiness in any kind of business, and
- idleness and freedom (my very favourite qualities).

All that has given me a mortal hatred of being obliged *to* or *through* anyone but myself. Before I avail myself of someone else's kindness, whether in a trivial matter or an important one, I make vigorous use of every means of doing without it. My friends upset me greatly when they ask me to ask a favour *for them* from a third person. It seems to me hardly less expensive to *release someone who is indebted to me by using him than* *than to bind myself for my friends' sake to a man who owes me nothing.* But I am easily accessible to each man's need, so long as it doesn't *involve asking others for help or* *put me to trouble and care* (for I have declared war to the death against all care).

[B] But my desire to give is not as intense as my desire not to receive, which Aristotle says is the easier choice. My fortune has not allowed me to do much good to others, and the little it has allowed me it has been directed to the very poor. If it had brought me into the world to hold some rank among men, I would have been ambitious to make myself loved, not to make myself feared or admired. Shall I express it more plainly? I would have been as much concerned to please people as to do them any good. . . .

What I mean to say, then, is that if we must owe some-

thing it should be

- by a more legitimate title than the one I am speaking of now, to which I am held by the law of this wretched war, and
- not for the overwhelming debt of our entire preservation.

I have gone to bed in my own home a thousand times thinking that someone would betray and kill me that night, bargaining with fortune that it—my death—should not be terrifying or long drawn-out. And after reciting the Lord's Prayer I have exclaimed, 'Shall a godless soldier possess these well-tilled fields?' [Virgil]

What remedy is there? I was born in this place and so were most of my ancestors; they set on it their love and their name. We become hardened to everything we are accustomed to. And in wretched circumstances such as ours, becoming-accustomed is a most kindly gift of nature, one that deadens our sense of suffering many evils.

Civil wars are worse than other wars because they put each man on sentry-guard in his own home. 'How pitiful it is to protect one's life by gates and walls, and to be scarcely safe in one's own home!' [Ovid] It is a great extremity to be hard-pressed even in one's own house, in the quiet of one's home. The region where I live is always the first and the last in the battles of our troubled times; peace never shows its full face there: 'Even in time of peace they tremble for fear of war' [Ovid] 'Whenever fortune strikes at peace, that is the road to war. It would have been better, fortune, if you had settled me in the remote east or in nomads' tents in the frozen north' [Lucan].

Sometimes I find in nonchalance and laxity a way of strengthening myself against such reflections; they too, to some extent, lead us toward fortitude. It often happens that I await mortal dangers with some pleasure; I plunge head

down, stupidly, without thinking about it or recognising it, as if into some silent dark deep that swallows me up at one jump and in an instant overwhelms me with a powerful sleep entirely lacking any sensation or suffering. And what I foresee as the consequence of those short and violent ·imagined· deaths consoles me more than the reality of death disturbs me. ^[C] (Life, they say, is no better for being long: death is better for not being so.) ^[B] I do not shrink from being dead as much as I become reassured about dying. I wrap myself up and nestle during the storm that must with a sudden and numbing attack blind me and sweep me away in its frenzy. . . .

^[C] Robbers, of their courtesy, have no particular grudge against me. Do I have any against them? I would have to hate too many people! Through different kinds of fortune, similar consciences harbour similar cruelty, treachery and robbery; and it is all the worse when it is more cowardly, more secure and dark, in the shadow of the laws. I hate open injustice less than treacherous injustice, warlike less than peaceful. Our fever has occurred in a body that is hardly the worse for it: the fire was there, the flames have sprung up; the noise is greater, the evil little greater.

·BACK TO REASONS FOR TRAVELLING·

^[B] When I am asked the reason for my travels, I usually reply that I know what I am escaping but not what I am looking for. If I am told that there may be just as little soundness among foreigners and that their *mœurs* are no better than ours, I reply that that is not easy, ‘There being so many shapes of wickedness! [Virgil]; and that there is always gain in exchanging a bad state for an uncertain one, and that the ills of others should not sting us as our own do.

I do not want to forget this, that I never rebel so much against France that I don’t look with a friendly eye on Paris:

it has had my heart since boyhood. And it has happened to me with •Paris—as it does with ·other· excellent things—the more beautiful other towns I have seen since, the more •its beauty gains power over my affections. I love it for itself, more in its essence than overloaded with irrelevant ornaments. I love it tenderly, even its warts and stains. It is only this great city that makes me a Frenchman ·as distinct from a Gascon·; a city great in population, great in its the felicity of its ·geographical· situation, but above all great and incomparable in the variety and diversity of the good things of life—the glory of France and one of the world’s noblest ornaments. May God drive our divisions far from it! When it is entire and united, I think, Paris is safe from other violence. I warn it that of all parties the worst will be the one that brings discord into Paris itself. I fear nothing for it but itself. And I certainly fear as much for it as for any other part of this state. As long as Paris endures, I shall not lack a retreat where I can withstand those barkings that assail me, sufficient to make me lose any regret for any other retreat.

Not because Socrates said it but because it really is my feeling (perhaps excessively so): I consider all men as my compatriots, embracing a Pole as I do a Frenchman, giving this national bond second place after the universal and common one. I am scarcely infatuated with the sweetness of my native air. Acquaintanceships that are entirely new and entirely mine seem to me to be worth quite as much as those other common chance acquaintanceships of the neighbourhood. Friendships purely of our own achievement normally outweigh those to which we are bound by sameness of climate or of blood. Nature launched us free and unfettered; we imprison ourselves in certain narrow districts. . . .

^[C] What Socrates did at the end of his life—considering a sentence of exile against him worse than a sentence of death—was something I don’t think I shall ever be so broken

or so strictly accustomed to my country as to do. These heaven-marked lives have plenty of **a** traits that I embrace more with esteem than with affection. They also have other **b** traits so lofty and extraordinary that I cannot embrace them even with esteem, because I cannot understand them. That was a very fastidious attitude in a man who considered the whole world his city! It is true that he despised wanderings and had hardly set foot outside territory of Attica. What are we to say about **•**his sparing his friends' money with which they would have saved his life, and **•**his refusal to escape from prison by the intervention of others, so as not to disobey the laws at a time when they were so thoroughly corrupt? Those examples fall into **a** my first category; there are others to be found in this same person that fall into **b** my second one. Many of these rare examples surpass **a** my power of action, but some surpass even **b** my power of judgement.

^[B] [Picking up from '... in certain narrow districts.'] In addition to such reasons, travel seems to me to be a profitable exercise. It keeps **•**the soul constantly exercised in observing new and unknown things; and (as I have often said) I know of no better school for forming one's life than to set before it constantly the variety found in so many other lives, ideas and customs, and to taste the perpetual variety in the forms of our nature. **•**The body is neither idle nor over-worked; the moderate exercise keeps it in good trim.

Even suffering from the stone [see Glossary] as I do, I stay in the saddle—without dismounting and without pain [or 'without boredom']—for eight or ten hours, 'Strength beyond the lot of old age' [Virgil]. No weather is inimical to me except the harsh heat of a blazing sun, for those parasols that Italy has used since the ancient Romans burden the arm more than they disburden the head. ^[C]I would like to know how much work it took for the Persians, so long ago at the very

birth of luxury, to produce at will cool winds and patches of shade, as Xenophon says they did. ^[B]I like rain and mud like a duck. Change of air and weather does not disturb me; to me all skies are alike. The only things that assail me are the internal troubles that I produce in myself, and they occur less during my travels.

It is hard to get me moving, but once I have started I will go on as far as I am wanted to. I balk at little undertakings as much as at big ones, at preparations for a day-trip to visit a neighbour as much as at preparations for a real journey. I have learned to do each day's journey in the Spanish style, all in one stage—long but reasonable stages—and when it is extremely hot I travel by night, from sunset to sunrise. (The other way—stopping to eat en route, in chaos and haste over your post-house dinner—is disagreeable, especially when the days are drawing in.) My horses are the better for it. No horse that could get through the first day's journey with me has ever let me down. I water them everywhere, merely taking care that there's enough road left for them to work it off. My laziness about getting up gives my attendants time to eat at their ease before we set off. I myself never dine very late. Appetite comes to me only with eating; except at table I never feel hungry.

Some people complain at my pleasure in continuing this practice, married and old as I am. They are wrong. The best time to leave your family is after you have set it on course to proceed without you, when you have left it in an order that does not belie its former character. It is far more imprudent to go off leaving your home in charge of a less reliable protectress who will take less trouble to provide for your needs. The most useful science and honourable occupation for a wife is the science of housekeeping. I know some who are thrifty but few who are good managers. Yet to be one is a wife's chief virtue, the one we should look for first

as the only dowry, the one that will save our households or ruin them. [C] Don't lecture me about this! Experience has taught me to seek one virtue above all others in a married woman: the virtue of sound housekeeping. [B] I put my wife in a position to exercise this when by my absence I leave the government of my house in her hands. It irritates me to see in many households Monsieur coming home about noon, all grimy and tetchy from the mill of business, while Madame is still in her dressing-room, dolling herself up and doing her hair. That is for queens to do—and I am not sure even about that. It is ridiculous and unfair that our wives should be maintained in idleness by our sweat and toil. [C] No-one, if I can help it, will have a more serene enjoyment of my goods than I do, one more more quiet and more free [*plus quiete et plus quitte.*] [B] If the husband provides the matter, nature itself wills that the wives provide the form.

As for the duties of marital love that are thought to be infringed by such absences, I do not believe it. On the contrary, it is a relationship that is readily cooled by too continuous a presence and is harmed by assiduity. Every strange woman strikes us as charming. And every man knows from experience that seeing each other all the time cannot match the pleasure of parting and coming together at intervals. [C] These interruption fill me with a fresh love for my family and restore me to a more agreeable use of my home. Alternation warms my appetite now for the one choice, now for the other.

[B] I know that friendship [see Glossary] has arms long enough to be held and joined from one end of the world to the other; and especially this kind—marital love—where there is a continuous exchange of services that reawaken the bond and memory of it. . . .

Enjoyment—possession—belongs mainly to the mind. [C] It more ardently and continuously embraces whatever it looks

for than anything we actually have at hand. Note how you spend your time every day: you will find that you are most absent from your friend when he is present to you: his presence relaxes your attention and gives your thoughts freedom to absent themselves at any time, for any reason. [B] From the distance of Rome, for example, I keep and control my household and the goods I have left there. Just as when I am there, I know within an inch or two how my walls, my trees or my rents are growing or declining. . . .

If we enjoy only things that we touch, then goodbye to our golden sovereigns when they are in our money-chests, and to our sons when they are out hunting. We want them nearer. In the garden: is that *far*? Is half a day's journey *far*? What about ten leagues? Is that *far* or *near*? If *near*, what about eleven leagues, twelve, thirteen and so on, step by step? Truly, if any wife can lay down for her husband how many steps take him to the end of *near* and how many take him to the start of *far*, I think she should make him stop somewhere in between. . . . [Then a passage, with quotations from Horace and Virgil, about the impossibility of precision in such matters, e.g. delimiting much and little, long and short, light and heavy, near and far.]

[B] Are they not still wives and mistresses of the dead, who are not at the end of this world but in the other world? We embrace not only our absent ones but also those who *have* existed or *will* exist. When we married each other, we did not contract to be continuously harnessed to one another. . . . [C] And a wife should not have her eyes so greedily fixed on her husband's front that when the need arises she cannot bear to see his back.

[B] This jest from a most excellent portrayer of their humours might be in place here, to describe the cause of their complaints: 'If you are late coming home, your wife assumes that you are in love with somebody, or somebody

with you, or drinking, or following your inclination; that you are having a good time without her while she feels miserable.' [Terence] Or might it not be that opposition and contradiction are themselves meat and drink to them, and that they are comfortable enough provided they make you uncomfortable?

In a true friendship [see Glossary]—which I have experienced—I give myself to my friend rather than drawing him to me.¹ I like doing him good better than having him do me good; but I would also rather have him doing good to himself than to me; he does me most good when he does himself good. If his absence is pleasant or useful to him, it is much sweeter to me than his presence; and it is not strictly *absence* when there is a way of keeping in touch. I used to get advantages and pleasure from our separation. By going our separate ways we possessed life more fully and widely. It was for me that he lived and saw and enjoyed things, and I for him, as fully as if he had been there. One part remained idle when we were together; we were merged into one. Being in different places made the union of our wills richer. This insatiable hunger for physical presence reveals a certain weakness in the enjoyment of souls.

As for my old age, which they bring against me, it is for *youth* to be enslaved by common opinions, restraining itself for the sake of others. Youth can provide for itself and for others; it is all that *we* can do to provide merely for ourselves. To the extent that natural comforts fail us, let us sustain ourselves by artificial ones. It is unfair to excuse youth for following its pleasures while forbidding old age to look for any. [C] Young, I covered my playful passions with prudence; old, I disperse my gloomy ones by dissipation. Though the Platonic laws forbid *foreign* travel before the age of 40 or 50, so as to make the travel more useful and instructive, I

would more readily agree to the second article in those same laws, which prohibits it after 60.

[B] 'But at your age you will never return from such a long road.' What do I care? I do not set out on it either to return from it or to complete it. I set out merely to keep on the move while moving pleases me. . . . My itinerary can be interrupted anywhere; it is not based on great hopes; each day's journey brings it to a *possible* end. My life's journey is conducted the same way. Yet I have seen enough far-off places where I would have liked to be detained. And why not, if so many men of the surliest sect [i.e. the stoics]—Chrysippus, Cleanthes, Diogenes, Zeno and Antipater—abandoned their homeland, having no cause to complain of it but merely wanting to enjoy a different atmosphere? Indeed what most displeases me in my wanderings is that I cannot accompany them with a resolution to settle down wherever I please, and that I must always be thinking of returning home so as to conform to common attitudes.

If I were to afraid of dying anywhere but where I was born—if I thought I would die less at my ease when far from my family—I would scarcely go out of France, and would be afraid to go out of my parish. I feel death continually, clutching at my throat or my loins. But I am made differently: death is the same for me anywhere. If I were to allowed to choose I would, I think, rather than dying in my bed die in the saddle, away from home and far from my own folk.

·TREATMENT OF THE DYING·

Taking leave of one's friends involves more heartbreak than consolation. I willingly neglect that social duty, for of all the offices of friendship it is the only displeasing one; and I would equally willingly forgo making that great eternal farewell. Although some advantage may be drawn from the

¹ [Montaigne is thinking here of his love for Étienne de La Boétie; see page 29 above, and essay 28 in Book I.]

presence of others, there are a hundred disadvantages. I have seen many men die most wretchedly, besieged by all this throng; they are suffocated by the crowd. It is undutiful (·they think·), and a sign of slight care and affection, to let you die in peace! Someone torments your eyes, another your ears, another your mouth; you have no sense or bodily part that they are not badgering. Your heart is racked with pity at hearing the lamentations of those who love you, and perhaps with anger at hearing other lamentations, feigned and hypocritical. Anyone who has always had fastidious tastes has them still more when he is weak. In such great straits he needs a gentle hand, suited to his feelings, to scratch him precisely where he itches. Otherwise he should not be touched. If we need a 'wise-woman' [meaning 'midwife'] to bring us into this world, we need an even wiser man to get us out of it. . . .

I have not reached the disdainful vigour that fortifies itself and that nothing can help, nothing disturb. I am a peg below that. Not from fear but by design, I want to burrow and hide as I pass away. It is not my intention to test or to display my constancy during that action. For whom would I be doing that? That time will bring to an end all my right to reputation and all my concern for it. I am satisfied with a collected, calm and solitary death, entirely my own, in keeping with my retiring and private life. Contrary to Roman superstition, which held a man to be wretched if he died without speaking and without his closest kinsfolk to close his eyes, I have enough to do to console myself without having to console others; enough thoughts in my mind without getting new ones from my circumstances; enough matter to ponder on without borrowing it. Dying is not a role for society; it is a scene with one character. Let us live and laugh among our own folk, and die and scowl among strangers. You will find, if you pay for it, someone who will turn your head and

massage your feet, who will not attend to you more than you want—showing you an unconcerned face and letting you reflect and lament in your own way.

Every day I argue myself out of that peurile and inhuman frame of mind that makes us want our misfortunes to arouse compassion and mourning in our friends. To bring on their tears we exaggerate our troubles. And the steadfastness in supporting ill-fortune that we praise in all men we condemn and reproach in our near and dear when the ill-fortune is ours. We are not content with their *sympathising with* our ills unless they are also *afflicted by* them.

We should spread joy, but cut back sadness as much as we can. [C] He who evokes pity without reason will not be pitied when there is reason for it. To be always lamenting for oneself is the way never to be lamented ·by anyone else· . . . He who acts dead when he is living is apt to be treated as alive when he is dying. I have seen some ·invalids· •become irritated when they were told they had a healthy colour and a regular pulse, •restrain their laughter because it would betray that they were cured, and •hate good health because it aroused no compassion. And these are not women that I'm talking about!

[B] I present my maladies, at most, just as they are, and I avoid words of foreboding and contrived exclamations. If not cheerfulness, at least a composed countenance is appropriate for those attending a wise man who is ill. He does not pick a quarrel with health just because he sees himself to be in the opposite condition; he delights in contemplating others' having strong and whole good health, at least enjoying it by association. He does not reject all thoughts of life or avoid ordinary conversation, just because he feels himself sinking. I want to study illness when I am well; when it is present, it makes a real enough impact without help from my imagination. . . .

·MONTAIGNE'S OPENNESS ABOUT HIMSELF·

I realise that there is an unexpected benefit from going public about my *mœurs*, ·as I do here·: to some extent it serves me as a rule. Sometimes the thought comes over me that I should not prove disloyal to the story of my life. This public disclosure obliges me to stick to my path and not falsify the picture of my qualities, which are on the whole less disfigured and distorted than might be expected from the malice and distemper of present-day judgements. The consistency and simplicity of my *mœurs* produce an outward appearance that is easy to interpret; but because the manner of ·my account of· it is rather novel and unusual, it gives slander too easy a time. Yet anyone who wanted to criticise me honestly would, it seems to me, find in my known and admitted imperfections plenty to get his teeth into and to satisfy him without fencing with the wind. If it seems to him that by getting in first with accusations and revelations I have made his bite toothless, it is reasonable that he should •exercise his right of amplification and extension (attack has rights beyond justice) and •take the defects whose roots in me I have revealed and magnify them into trees, using for this not only such defects as have a hold on me but also those that threaten me. Both in quality and quantity they are iniquitous; let him beat me with them.

[C] I would gladly follow the example of Bion the philosopher, whom Antigonus was trying to provoke on the subject of his origins. He cut him short and retorted:

‘I am the son of a butcher—a branded slave—and of a prostitute whom my father married because of the baseness of his fortune. Both were punished for some misdeed. When I was a child an orator found me attractive and bought me. When he died he left me all his possessions. I transferred them here to Athens and devoted myself to philosophy. Biographers need

not struggle to get information about me; I will tell them how things stand.

Free and generous confession weakens reproach and disarms slander.

[B] Yet it seems that—all in all—I am as often praised as dispraised beyond reason; just as it seems to me that I have since my youth been given a degree of rank and honour above rather than below what I am entitled to. [C] I would feel more at ease in a land where such rankings were either regulated or despised. Among men, as soon as an argument about the order of precedence in processions or seating goes beyond three replies, it is uncivil. To avoid such churlish disputes I am never afraid to take or yield precedence unjustly; no man has ever challenged my right to go first without my yielding precedence to him.

[B] In addition to this profit that I derive from writing about myself, there is another that I hope for, namely that my humours happen to please and suit some worthy man before I die, and he tries to bring us together. I am meeting him more than half-way, since all that he could have gained from many years of intimacy with me he could get more reliably and minutely in three days from the present account.

[C] A pleasing fancy: many things that I would not tell to any individual man I tell to the public, and for knowledge of my most secret thoughts I refer my most loyal friends to a bookseller's stall! . . .

[B] If on equally good evidence I knew a man who was right for me I would certainly go far to find him, for in my opinion the sweetness of well-matched and compatible fellowship can never cost too dear. . . .

·BACK TO THE TOPIC OF DYING·

[Picking up from ‘lament in your own way.’ on page 109]. To get back to my theme: So there is no great evil in dying far off and

alone. [C] Indeed we reckon that it is a duty to seek seclusion for natural functions less unsightly and less repulsive than that one. [B] But also those who are reduced by their sufferings to drag out a long existence ought perhaps not to wish to burden a large family with their misery. [C] That is why the Indians in one province thought it right to kill anyone who had fallen into such distress; in another province they abandoned him alone, to save himself as best he could.

[B] Is there anyone who does not find them—i.e. those who are dying in a long-drawn-out way—in the end an intolerable burden? Ordinary duties do not extend that far. Inevitably you teach cruelty to those who love you best, hardening your wife and children by long habit not to feel or pity your afflictions any longer. The groans of my colic [see Glossary] paroxysms no longer cause emotion in anyone. And even if we were to derive some pleasure from their company, . . . is it not too much to take advantage of this for an entire age? The more I saw them generously constraining themselves for my sake, the more I would regret the trouble they were taking. We have a right to lean on others, but not to lie so heavily on top of them, supporting ourselves by their collapse. Like that man who had little boys' throats slit so as to use their blood to cure an illness of his, or like that other man who was supplied with young girls to warm his old limbs at night and to mingle the sweetness of their breath with the heavy sourness of his own. As an asylum for such a condition and so feeble an existence I would prescribe myself Venice.

[C] Decrepitude is a solitary quality. I am sociable to the point of excess; yet it seems reasonable to me that henceforth I should withdraw my troublesome self from the sight of the world and brood over it by myself, shrinking and retiring into my shell like a tortoise. . . . It is time to turn my back on company.

[B] 'But on such a long journey you will have to stop

miserably in a hovel where you will lack everything.' I carry with me most of the things I need. Anyway, we cannot escape fortune if it undertakes to attack us. I need nothing extraordinary when I am ill; what nature cannot do for me I do not want to be done by a pill. At the very onset of any fever or sickness that strikes me down, while I am still in one piece and almost healthy, I reconcile myself to God by the last Christian rites; I find myself more free and unburdened, seeming to have achieved by them the upper hand over my illness. I have less need of lawyer and counsel than of doctors. If there is anything that I do not settle when in good health, don't expect me to settle it when I am ill. What I intend to do to prepare for my death is done already: I would not dare to put it off for one single day. . . .

·BACK TO THE TOPIC OF SELF-REVELATION·

I write my book for a few men and for a few years. If it had been on a lasting subject, it would have needed to be put in a more durable language. Judging from the constant changes of our own tongue up to the present, who can hope that its present form will be current fifty years from now?. . . .

That is why I am not afraid to put in several personal details that are useful only to men who are alive today, and that touch on things known by some folk who will see further into them than the general public can. When all is said and done, I do not want to have happen something that I often see troubling the memory of the dead, namely people debating

'This is how he thought'

'This is how he lived'

'If he had spoken when dying, he would have said. . . .'

' . . . he would have given. . . .'

'I knew him better than anyone else.'

Here ·in these essays· I make known, as far as propriety allows, my feelings and inclinations; but I do so more freely

and readily by word of mouth to anyone who wants to know them. Nevertheless if you look into these memoirs, you will find that I have said everything or suggested everything. What I cannot express ·in words· I point to with my finger: ‘Those slight traces are enough for a keen mind, and will safely lead you to discover the rest’ [Lucretius]. About myself I leave nothing to be guessed at by people wanting to know. If people talk about me, I want them to do it truly and fairly. I would willingly come back from the next world to contradict anyone who portrayed me other than I was, even if he did it to honour me. (I know that even the living are spoken of otherwise than they really are.) If I had not with all my might come to the defence of a friend whom I had lost [La Boétie], they would have torn him into a thousand different appearances.

·DEATH AGAIN·

To finish talking of my foibles, I admit that I hardly ever arrive at my lodgings ·during my travels· without having the thought that I might fall ill and die there, comfortably. I want to be lodged in a place that I have entirely to myself, not noisy or dirty or smoky or stuffy. By these trivial details I try to humour death, or rather to relieve myself of all other impediments so that I can concentrate on death alone; it will weigh heavily enough on me without any other load. I want it to have a share in the ease and comfort of my life. Death forms a big part of it, an important one. . . .

Some forms of death are easier than others; death takes on qualities that differ according to each man’s way of thinking. Among natural deaths, the one that comes from enfeeblement and stupor seems to me gentle and pleasant. Among violent ones, I find it far harder to picture falling from a precipice than being crushed by a falling building, a piercing sword-thrust than a arquebuse shot; and I would

rather have drunk Socrates’ potion than stabbed myself like Cato. And although it is all one, my imagination feels as great a difference between throwing myself into a fiery furnace and into the channel of a shallow river as between death and life. So absurdly does our fear consider the means more than the result! It is only an instant, but it is of such gravity that I would willingly give several days of my life to go through it in my own way.

Since each man’s imagination finds more or less harshness in it, since each has some choice among ways of dying, let us try a little further to find one free from all unpleasantness. Might we not even make death luxurious, as did Antony and Cleopatra, those partners in death? I set aside the **a** harsh and **b** exemplary results produced by **a** philosophy and **b** religion. But among lesser men there have been some—like a certain Petronius and Tigillinus in Rome, who were required to kill themselves—who have put death to sleep, as it were, by the comfort of their preparations. They made it flow and glide past, amid the laxity of their customary pastimes, among girls and good companions; no talk of consolation, no mention of a will, no pretentious show of constancy, no conversation about their future state; but amidst games, feasts, jokes, common everyday conversation, music and love-poetry. Could we not imitate their resoluteness, with more decent behaviour?

Since there are deaths good for fools and deaths good for wise men, let us find some that are good for people in between. . . .

·MONTAIGNE’S CONDUCT AS A TRAVELLER·

[B] In my lodgings I do not look for grandiose size—I hate that, rather—but a certain simple rightness that is more often met in places where there is less artifice and which nature honours with a certain grace that is all its own. . . .

Moreover, it is for those whose business drags them up over the Grisons in midwinter to be ambushed by death on the road. I, who most often travel for my own pleasure, do not direct myself so badly. If it looks ugly to the right, I turn off to the left; if I find myself unfit to ride my horse, I stop. And in so doing I truly see nothing that is not as pleasant and comfortable as my home. It is true that I always find superfluity superfluous, and feel uneasy even amid delicacy and abundance.

Have I left something unseen behind me? I go back to it; it is still on my road. I follow no definite line, whether straight or crooked. Do I go to a place and not find there what I was told to expect? As others' judgements often do not agree with mine, and more prove to be wrong, I do not regret the trouble I have taken: I have learned *something* by it, namely that what they told me about is not there!

My physical disposition is as adaptable and my tastes as ordinary as those of any man in the world. The diversity of fashions between one nation and another affects me only with the pleasure of variety. Each usage has its reason. Let the dishes be

- pewter, wood or earthenware,
- boiled or roasted,
- butter or chestnut oil or olive oil,
- hot or cold;

it is all the same to me. . . .

[C] When I have been out of France and people have courteously inquired whether I want to eat French cooking, I have always laughed at the idea and hastened straight for the tables most crowded with foreigners. [B] I am ashamed at the sight of our Frenchmen besotted by that stupid disposition to shy away from fashions contrary to their own; once they

are out of their village it seems to them that they are out of their element. Wherever they go, they cling to their ways and abominate foreign ones. If they come across a fellow-Frenchman in Hungary, they celebrate this coincidence: see them rallying round and joining forces, condemning every custom in sight as barbarous. The customs are not French, so *of course* they are barbarous! And those are the abler ones, who have ·at least· noticed those customs, in order to abuse them. Most ·Frenchmen· go abroad only for the sake of returning home. They travel covered and wrapped in a taciturn and uncommunicative prudence, defending themselves from the contagion of an unknown atmosphere. . . .

I on the contrary, travel as one fed up with our customs, not looking for Gascons in Sicily—I have left enough of them at home! I rather look for Greeks or Persians. I make their acquaintance and study them. That is what I devote myself to and work on. And, what is more, I seem hardly ever to have come across any customs that are not worth as much as our own. I don't risk much ·by saying that·, for I have hardly been out of sight of my own weathercocks.¹

For the rest, most of the chance acquaintances that you meet on the road are more of a nuisance than a pleasure. I don't latch onto them, especially now when old age sets me somewhat alone and apart from the common ways. . . . It is a rare stroke of fortune, but inestimably comforting, to have as a travelling companion an honest man who has a sound understanding and *mœurs* that conform to your own. I have greatly missed one on all my travels. But such a companion must be selected and secured from the outset.

No pleasure has any savour for me without communication; no merry thought occurs to me without my being vexed at coming up with it when I am alone, with no-one to offer it

¹ [His travels were all confined to western Europe.]

to. ^[C] 'If wisdom were granted me on condition that I shut it away unspoken, I would reject it' [Seneca]. This other raised it a note higher: 'Supposing it were granted to a sage to live in every abundance, his time entirely free to study and reflect upon everything worth knowing; still, if his solitude were such that he could never see another man, he would abandon life' [Cicero]. . . .

·BACK TO REASONS FOR TRAVELLING·

^[B] 'Do you not have easier ways of spending your time? What do you lack? Isn't your house set in a fine healthy climate, adequately furnished and more than adequately spacious? ^[C] The King's majesty [Henry of Navarre] has stayed there more than once. ^[B] Aren't there many more families below yours in orderliness than ones above it in eminence? Is some extraordinary and indigestible domestic worry giving you an ulcer ('and which, rooted in your stomach, burns you and distresses you' [Ennius])? Where do you think you can ever be without fuss and bother? 'Fortune never sends unmixed blessings' [Quintus Curtius]. You should see that nobody is in your way but yourself, and that you will be sorry for yourself wherever you go, for there is no satisfaction here below except for souls like those of beasts or gods. If a man has no contentment when there is such a sound occasion for it, where can he expect to find it? How many thousands of men aim no higher than circumstances such as yours? Just reform *yourself*, for in that your power is unlimited; whereas in face of fortune you have no right but to endure. ^[C] There is no peace and quiet except what reason has contrived' [Seneca].

^[B] I see the reasonableness of such counsel, and see it very well; but it would have been quicker and more to the point simply to say to me '**Be wise!**' This resolution [i.e. the indented one above] lies on the other side of wisdom: wisdom makes it and produces it. Offering it is like a physician yelling at a wretched, languishing patient to be cheerful; he would be prescribing a little less stupidly if he said '**Be well!**' As for me, I am only a man of the lower sort. 'Be content with what is yours, i.e. with reason'—that is a salutary precept, definite and easy to understand; but the wisest men cannot put it into effect, any more than I can. It is a popular saying, but terribly far-reaching; what does it *not* cover? . . .

I am well aware that, taken strictly, this pleasure in travelling bears witness to restlessness and irresolution. Those are indeed our ruling and predominant qualities. Yes, I admit that I see nothing, even in a dream or a wish, to which I can hold fast. The only things that satisfy me are variety and the enjoyment of diversity—at least if anything satisfies me. When on my travels I am encouraged by the fact that I can stop without hindrance and have a place in which I can comfortably divert myself.

I love living a private life because I live it¹ by my own choice, not because of unfitness for a public one, which is perhaps just as well suited to my character. I serve my prince more cheerfully because I am doing so by the free choice of my judgement and of my reason, ^[C] without personal obligation, ^[B] and because I am not forced into his service by being unacceptable to all the other parties or disliked by them. Similarly with the rest. I hate the morsels that necessity carves for me. Any advantage I had to *depend on* would have me by the throat. 'Let me have one oar in the water, and with the other rake the shore' [Propertius].

¹ [The original has *je l'ayme* = 'I love it'; presumably a slip.]

A single cord never holds me in one place. 'There is vanity', you say, 'in this pastime of travelling.' But where is there not? Those fine precepts are all vanity, and all wisdom is vanity. [C] 'The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain' [1 Corinthians 3.20]. [B] Those exquisite subtleties are only good for sermons; they are arguments that seek to drive us in harness into the next world. Life is material motion in the body, an activity that is by its very essence imperfect and irregular. I work to serve it on its own terms. . . . 'We must act so as not to oppose the universal laws of nature in general; but with these safeguarded, let us follow our own nature' [Cicero].

·HAUGHTY MORALISING·

[B] What is the use of those high philosophical peaks on which no human being can settle and those rules that exceed our practice and our power? I often see patterns of life being proposed to us that neither the speaker nor the hearers have any hope of following or (what is more) any wish to follow. The judge filches a bit of the paper on which he has just written the sentence on an adulterer in order to send a billet-doux to the wife of a colleague. [C] Just after you have an illicit tumble with her, a woman will in your presence be screaming against a similar fault in her friend harsher condemnations than Portia would. [B] Some condemn men to death for crimes that they do not regard even as mistakes. When I was a youth I saw a fine gentleman offering to the public

- with one hand **a** verses excelling in beauty and licentiousness, and at the same moment
- with the other **b** the most quarrelsome work of theological reform that the world has feasted on for a long time.

[Theodore Beza, **a** erotic poet and **b** successor to Calvin.]

That is the way men behave; we let laws and precepts go their way; we take another way—not only because of unruly *mœurs* but often because of contrary opinion and judgement. Listen to a philosophical argument; its inventiveness, eloquence and relevance immediately strike your mind and move you; but there is nothing there that tickles or pricks your conscience; the argument wasn't addressed to your conscience, was it? Yet Ariston said that neither a bath nor a lecture is any use unless it scrubs and cleanses. You can linger over the hide, but only after extracting the marrow, just as we examine the engravings and workmanship of a handsome cup only after drinking the wine it contained.

In all the barracks of the ancient philosophers you will find that a single author publishes rules for temperance and at the same time publishes works of love and debauchery. [C] And Xenophon wrote against Aristippus's sensuality, while lying in the lap of Clinias. [B] It's not that there was a miraculous conversion intermittently sweeping over them. Rather, it is that Solon presents himself at one time as **a** himself and at another as **b** a lawgiver, speaking at one time for **b** the crowd and at another for **a** himself; and for himself he adopts the free and natural rules, being certain of having firm and entire moral health. . . .

[C] Antisthenes permits the sage to like and do in his own way anything that suits him, without heeding the laws, because he has a better judgement than the laws do and more knowledge of virtue. His disciple Diogenes said that we should counter perturbations by reason, fortune by confidence, nature by laws.

[B] Delicate stomachs require strict artificial diets; [C] sound stomachs simply follow the prescriptions of their natural appetite, [B] as do our doctors who eat melons and drink new wine while requiring their patient to be restricted to syrups and slops.

'I know nothing of their books,' said Lais the courtesan, 'or of their wisdom and philosophy, but those fellows knock at my door as often as anyone.' Since our licentiousness always takes us beyond what is lawful and permitted, men have often made the precepts and laws for our lives stricter than universal reason requires. 'No-one thinks it's enough to break the rules only as much as he is allowed to' [Juvenal]

It would be better if there were more proportion between the command and the obedience; and a goal we cannot reach seems unfair. No man is so good that if he subjected all his deeds and thoughts to legal examination by the laws, he would not deserve hanging ten times in his life—even the kind of man whom it would be a very great loss and a very great injustice to punish and destroy. . . . And one who deserves no praise as a man of virtue [C] and whom philosophy could most justly cause to be flogged [B] may well break no laws, so confused and uneven is this relationship between law and virtue.

We have no wish to be good folk according to God; we cannot be so according to ourselves. Human wisdom has never lived up to the duties it has prescribed for itself; and if it had achieved that, it would have prescribed for itself more duties still, towards which it would continually strive and aspire, so hostile is our condition to consistency. [C] Man commands himself to be necessarily at fault. It is not very clever of him to tailor his obligations to the standards of a different kind of being. To whom is he prescribing what he expects no-one to do? Is it wrong of him not to do what it is impossible for him to do? The very laws that condemn us to be unable blame us for being unable.

[B] At worst, this deformed licence to present oneself in two aspects—actions in one fashion and speech in another—may

be conceded to those who tell of things; it cannot apply to those who tell of themselves as I do; I must go the same way with my pen as with my feet. Life in society should have some relation to other lives. Cato's virtue was excessively rigorous by the standards of his age; and in a man occupied in governing others and destined to serve the commonwealth, his justice could be said to be—if not downright unjust—at least vain and unseasonable. [C] My own *mœurs* deviate from current ones by hardly more than an inch, yet even that makes me somewhat shy and unsociable for this age. I do not know whether I am unreasonably disgusted with the world I frequent, but I am well aware that it *would* be unreasonable if I complained that the world was more disgusted with me than I am with it. [Here and below, the word 'disgust' may be too strong; the French *degousté*, could concern merely losing a taste for . . .]

·VIRTUE IN WORLDLY AFFAIRS·

[B] The virtue assigned to the world's affairs is a virtue with many folds, angles and elbows so that it can be made to fit human frailty; it is complex and artificial, not straight, clear-cut, constant, or purely innocent. To this very day our annals criticise one of our kings for allowing himself to be too naively influenced by the persuasions his confessor addressed to his conscience.¹ Affairs of state have bolder precepts: 'He who would be pious should quit the court' [Lucan].

In my private life I use, if not conveniently at least surely, opinions and rules of life that were born in me or instilled into me by education—rough, fresh, unpolished and unpolluted ones, constituting the virtue of a schoolboy or a novice. I once I tried to use these in the service of some public manoeuvrings, and found them to be inapplicable and dangerous. Anyone who walks in the crowd should step

¹ [Probably Henry II, whom the Cardinal de Lorraine persuaded to persecute the members of the Reformed Church.]

aside, squeeze in his elbows, step back or advance—even leave the straight path—according to what he encounters; he must live not so much by his norms but by those of others; not according to what he proposes but according to what is proposed to him, and according to the time, according to the men, according to the business.

[C] Plato says that anyone who escapes with clean breeches from the management of the world's affairs does so by a miracle. He also says that when he lays it down that his philosopher should be head of the government, he does not mean a corrupted government like that of Athens, much less ones like ours, faced with which wisdom itself would waste its Latin, Just as a herb transplanted into a soil ill-suited to its nature conforms itself to that soil rather than reforming the soil to suit itself.

[B] I am aware that if I had to prepare myself thoroughly for such occupations, I would need a great deal of change and remodelling. Even if I was able to do that to myself (and why couldn't I, given time and trouble?), I would not want to. From the little experience I have had in that profession, I am just that much disgusted with it. Sometimes I feel the fumes of certain temptations towards ambition arising in my soul, but I tense myself and obstinately resist. . . . I am hardly ever summoned to public service, and I just as seldom volunteer for it. [C] My dominant qualities, liberty and laziness, are diametrically opposite to that trade!

[B] We cannot distinguish men's faculties from one another; their borderlines and boundaries are fine-grained and hard to determine. To infer a man's competence for public affairs from the competence of his private life is to make a bad inference. One man guides himself well but does not guide others well, [C] and produces Essays [see Glossary] but cannot

produce results; [B] another directs a siege well but would direct a battle badly, and speaks well in private but would make a bad job of addressing a crowd or his prince. Indeed, a man's ability to do one may be evidence not that he can do the other but rather that he can't.

[C] I find that higher intellects are hardly less suited to lowlier matters than lowly intellects are to the higher. Is it credible that Socrates gave the Athenians a good laugh at his expense because he was unable to count up the votes of his tribe and report them to the Council? Truly my veneration for that great man's perfections makes it appropriate that his fortune provides such a magnificent example to excuse my chief imperfections!

[B] Our competence is cut into little bits. Mine own has no breadth, and its pieces are wretchedly few. Saturninus said to those who had made him supreme commander: 'You have lost a fine captain, comrades, to make a poor general.'

If in a sick time like ours someone boasts of bringing a pure and sincere virtue to the world's service, either •he has no idea what virtue is, since opinions are corrupted along with *mœurs*—

indeed, just listen to them portraying it, glorying in their behaviour and formulating rules; they portray simple injustice and vice, which they present under the guise of virtue in the education of princes

—or else •he boasts wrongfully and (whatever he says) does many things for which his conscience condemns him. I would believe Seneca's¹ account of his experience in similar circumstances, if he was willing to talk to me about it openly. The most honourable mark of goodness in a predicament like his is to acknowledge freely one's own defects and those of others, doing all one can to resist and slow down the slide

¹ [Seneca was a morally serious essayist and playwright, and an advisor to the emperor Nero.]

towards evil, descending it unwillingly while expecting and wanting improvement.

During the divisions into which we are fallen, tearing France apart, I notice that each man labours to defend his cause, but even the best of them do it with deception and lying. Anyone who wrote openly about the situation would do so rashly and harmfully, because inadequately and ill-advisedly. The most just party in this civil war is still a limb of a worm-eaten and maggoty body. Yet in such a body the least affected limb is termed healthy—rightly so, since our qualities are valid only by comparison. Civil innocence is measured according to the places and the times.

I would greatly like to see Agesilaus praised as follows in Xenophon. Having been asked by a neighbouring prince with whom he had formerly been at war for permission to pass through his domains, he granted it, allowing him passage through the Peloponnesus. And not only did he not imprison or poison him, despite having him at his mercy, but he welcomed him courteously without doing him injury. Given the characters of people then, such things were taken for granted; **a** elsewhere and **b** at other times men will tell of the frankness and magnanimity of that deed. But **a** here and **b** now the wretched monkeys in our schools would laugh at it, so little does our French ‘innocence’ resemble that of the Spartans!

We do nevertheless have men who are virtuous, but only by our standards. Someone whose *mœurs* are based on rules above the standards of his time must either •distort and blunt his rules or •draw apart and have nothing to do with us. I would advise him to take the latter course. If he took the former, what would he gain from it? ‘When I come across an outstandingly moral man, he seems to me like a kind of freak, like a two-headed child, like fish turning up under the farmer’s ploughshare, or like a pregnant mule’

[Juvenal]. We can regret better times but we cannot escape from the present; we can wish for better men to govern us but despite that we should obey those we have. And perhaps there is more merit in obeying bad rulers than in obeying good ones. As long as the image of the accepted and ancient laws of this monarchy of ours shines in some corner, you will see me planted there. If those laws unfortunately come to contradict and interfere with each other, presenting a hard choice between two factions, my choice would be to slink away and hide from that tempest. In the meantime, nature may lend me a hand; so may the hazards of war.

Between Caesar and Pompey I would have declared myself openly. But among those three robbers who came after them—Mark Antony, Octavius, Lepidus—I would have had either to flee into hiding or to go the way the wind blew, which I judge to be legitimate when reason no longer guides. . . .

·DOES MONTAIGNE RAMBLE?·

This padding is rather off my subject. I stray, but more by licence than carelessness. My ideas follow one another, though sometimes at a distance, and look at each other, though with a sidelong glance. ^[C] I have run my eyes over one of Plato’s dialogues [the *Phaedrus*], a fantastic motley in two parts, the beginning part about love, all the rest about rhetoric. The ancients are not afraid of such changes, and have a marvellous charm when letting themselves be blown along by the wind in this way, or appearing to be so. ^[B] The titles of my chapters [= essays] do not always encompass my subject-matter; often they merely indicate it by some sign. . . .

I like the way poetry moves, by jumping and skipping. ^[C] Poetry, says Plato, is an art that is light, capricious, daemonic. There are works of Plutarch’s in which he forgets his theme, in which the treatment of his subject is found only incidentally, quite smothered in extraneous matter. See

his sprightly *The Daemon of Socrates*. Lord, what beauty there is these lusty sallies and in this variation, especially when they appear fortuitous and casual.

It is the inattentive reader who loses my subject, not I. There will always be found in a corner a phrase that is adequate despite being squeezed in tight. ^[B] I seek change indiscriminately and chaotically. ^[C] My pen and my mind go roaming together. ^[B] If you do not want more dullness you must accept a touch of madness, ^[C] so say the precepts—and even more the examples—of our masters.

^[B] A thousand poets drag and droop prosaically, but the best ancient prose ^[C] and I scatter it here indifferently as though it were verse ^[B] shines throughout with poetic vigour and boldness. . . . We should certainly cede to it mastery and preeminence in speech. [Two previous translators understand ‘it’ here to be poetry; another who takes it to be prose seems to be right.] ^[C] The poet, says Plato, seated on the tripod of the Muses, pours out in a frenzy whatever comes into his mouth, like the spout of a fountain, without chewing and weighing it; and from him there escape—in an intermittent flow—things of different colours and contradictory substance. Plato himself is entirely poetic; and the scholars say that the ancient theology was poetry, as was the first philosophy. It is the original language of the gods.

^[B] I want the matter to make its own divisions; it shows well enough where it changes, where it starts, where it ends, where it picks up again, without interlacing it with words—links and seams for the benefit of weak or inattentive ears—and without explaining what I am doing. Who is there who would rather not be read at all than be read sleepily or in haste? ^[C] ‘Nothing is so efficacious that it can be helpful while it is being shifted about’ [Seneca]. If picking up [*prendre*] books were taking them in [*apprendre*], if glancing at them were seeing *into* them, and skipping through them were

grasping them, I would be wrong to make myself out to be quite so totally ignorant as I say I am.

^[B] Since I cannot hold my reader’s attention by the weight of what I write, it is no bad thing if I hold it by my tangles. ‘Yes, but afterwards he will be sorry he was perplexed over them.’ I suppose so; but he will go on being perplexed by them! And there are natures that despise anything they understand and will rate me more highly because they won’t know what I mean. They will infer the depth of my meaning from its obscurity. Joking aside, I strongly hate obscurity, and would avoid it if I could avoid *myself*. Aristotle somewhere boasts of affecting it: a depraved affectation! . . .

·THOUGHTS FROM ROME·

I have already seen elsewhere—i.e. other than in Rome, where I now am—ruined palaces and sculptures both divine and human; and they are always the works of men. True though that is, I could not revisit the tomb of this great and mighty city so often that I wouldn’t wonder at it and revere it.

We are enjoined to care for the dead. Now, since infancy I was brought up with the dead of Rome; I was familiar with the affairs of Rome long before I was with those of my own house; I knew the Capitol and its site before I knew the Louvre, and the Tiber before the Seine. I thought more about the characters and fortunes of Lucullus, Metellus and Scipio than those of any of our own men. They are dead; and so is my father, as completely dead as they are; and he has moved as far from me and from life in 18 years as they have done in 1600; despite which I embrace and cherish his memory, his friendship and society, in a union that is perfect and very much alive.

Indeed, as a matter of temperament it is to the dead that I am most dutiful; they can no longer help themselves, so it seems to me that they need my help the more. That is where

gratitude shows in its proper lustre. A benefit is less richly bestowed when there is reciprocity and return. Arcesilaus, visiting the ailing Ctesibius and finding him badly off, gave him money by slipping it under his pillow. By concealing it he was also releasing him from gratitude. Those who have deserved my love and thanks have never lost anything through being no longer there; I have repaid them better and more punctiliously when they were absent and unaware of what I was doing. I speak all the more affectionately of my friends when they no longer have any way of knowing it.

Now, I have begun a hundred quarrels in defence of Pompey and for the cause of Brutus. Friendship still endures between us, and there's nothing weird about this, because even things present to us are grasped only by the imagination. Finding myself useless for this present age, I fall back on that one, and am so bewildered by it that I have a passionate concern for the state of ancient Rome, free and just and flourishing (for I don't like its infancy or its old age). That is why I could never so often revisit the site of their streets and their palaces, and their ruins stretching deep down to the Antipodes, without lingering over them. ^[C] Seeing places that we know were frequented and inhabited by people whose memory is held in honour moves us somewhat more than hearing a recital of their deeds or reading their writings; is this by nature or by an aberrant imagination? 'Such is the power of places to call up memories. And in this city there is no end to this; wherever we go, we walk over history' [Cicero].

^[B] I like thinking about their faces, their bearing and their clothing. I chew over those great names between my teeth and make them resound in my ears. ^[C] 'I venerate them, and always leap to my feet to honour such great names' [Seneca]. ^[B] When things are great and admirable in some parts, I admire even their ordinary parts. I would enjoy seeing them talk, walk and eat. It would be ungrateful to neglect the

remains and images of so many honest and valiant men whom I have seen live and die, and who by their example provide us with so many instructions, if only we knew how to follow them.

And then this same Rome that we see now deserves our love as having been so long and by so many claims an ally of our crown—the only universal city, the only one that all men have in common. The sovereign magistrate [see Glossary] who commands there is equally acknowledged everywhere; it is the metropolitan city of all the Christian nations; the Spaniard and the Frenchman are both at home there. To be a prince of that state you need only to belong to Christendom, no matter what part of it. There is no other place here below that heaven has embraced with such favourable influence and such constancy. Even its ruin is glorious and stately: ^[C] 'More precious for her memorable ruins' [Sidonius Appollinaris]. ^[B] Even in the tomb, Rome retains some signs and image of empire. ^[C] 'That it may be manifest that in one place Nature delights in her work' [Pliny].

^[B] Someone might condemn himself and inwardly rebel for being tickled by such a vain pleasure. Our humours are not too vain if they provide pleasure. . . .

·AN ASIDE ON MONTAIGNE'S GOOD FORTUNE·

I am deeply indebted to Fortune in that up to now she has done nothing hostile to me, at least nothing beyond what I can bear. Might it not be her style to leave in peace those who do not pester it? 'The more a man denies himself, the more he will receive from the gods. Poor as I am, I seek the company of those who want nothing. Those who want much, lack much' [Horace]. If she continues in this way, she will send me hence content and well satisfied: 'For nothing more do I harass the gods' [Horace]. But watch out for the crash! Hundreds are wrecked within the harbour.

I easily console myself over what will happen here when I am here no longer; present concerns keep me busy enough, and 'The rest I entrust to Fortune' [Ovid]. Besides, I do not have that strong link that is said to bind a man to the future by offspring who bear his name and rank;¹ and if *that* is what makes them desirable, I should perhaps desire them all the less. I am—of myself, ·i.e. without any influence from having sons·—only too bound to the world and to this life. I am content to be in Fortune's grip through circumstances strictly necessary to my existence, without extending her jurisdiction over me in other ways; and I have never thought that not having sons was a lack that should make life less complete and less contented. There are advantages too in the vocation of childlessness. Sons are among the things that do not have much to make them desired, especially these days when it would be hard to make them good. [C] Nothing good can be produced now; the seeds are so corrupt' [Tertullian]. And yet once they have been acquired, there is reason to regret them if they are lost.

He who left me in charge of my house predicted that I would ruin it, seeing how little I was inclined towards domesticity. He was wrong. Here I am, just as I inherited it, or perhaps a little better off, yet without public office and without benefice.

Still, though Fortune has done me no violent and extraordinary injury, neither has she done me any favour. Any gifts of hers in our home were there more than a hundred years before I was. I don't owe one solid essential good thing to her generosity. She has done me some honorary titular favours, all wind and no substance; and (God knows!) she did not *grant* them to me but *offered* them to me ·unasked·—to me who am wholly material, who seek satisfaction in realities,

and very massive ones at that; and who, if I dare admit it, think that

- ambition is nearly as bad as avarice,
- disgrace is no worse than pain,
- learning is no better than health, and
- noble rank is no better than riches.

[In that list, the items on the left are ones Montaigne sees as windy and insubstantial, the ones on the right as realities.]

·MONTAIGNE IS HONOURED BY ROME·

Among Fortune's vain favours, I have none more pleasing to that silly humour in me that feeds on such things than an authentic bull of Roman citizenship that was granted to me recently when I was there. [Montaigne devotes a page to describing the elegant formalities of this presentation, and quoting it in full. Then he continues:]

Not being the citizen of any city, I am delighted to be one of the noblest city there ever was or ever will be. If others looked attentively into themselves (as I do), they would find themselves (as I do) full of inanity and nonsense. I cannot rid myself of these without getting rid of *myself*. We are all steeped in them, each as much as the other; but those who realise this get off a little more cheaply, as I know.

The common attitude and habit of looking elsewhere than at ourselves has served our affairs well! Our self is an object full of dissatisfaction: we can see nothing there but wretchedness and vanity. So as not to dishearten us, nature has very conveniently directed our sight outwards. We go forward with the current, but to struggle back towards ourselves is a painful movement; thus does the sea become troubled and turbulent when driven back against itself. 'Look', says everyone, 'at

- the motions of the heavens,

¹ [He means sons; he had one daughter and no sons.]

- society,
- this man's quarrel,
- that man's pulse,
- this other man's will and testament';

in short, always look upwards or downwards, or sideways, or before or behind you.

It was a paradoxical command that the god at Delphi gave to us in ancient times:

Look into yourself, know yourself, keep to yourself; bring back your mind and will, which are being squandered elsewhere, into themselves; you are draining and frittering yourself away; consolidate yourself, rein yourself in. You are being betrayed, dispersed, and stolen away from yourself. Don't you see that this world keeps its gaze bent inwards and its eyes open to contemplate itself? . . . Except for you, O man (said that god), each thing first studies itself, and according to its needs sets limits to its labours and desires. Not one is as empty and needy as you, who embrace the universe: you are the Investigator with no knowledge, the judge with no jurisdiction and, when all is done, the jester of the farce.

10. Restraining your will

^[B] In comparison with most men, I am •touched by few things—or, to speak more correctly, I am •held by few things. for it is right that things should touch us, provided they don't possess us. I take care to extend •by reason and reflection this privileged lack of emotion, which is •by nature well advanced in me. I am wedded to few things, and so am passionate about few. My sight is clear, but I fix it on few objects. . . . I do not easily get involved. As far as possible I

employ myself entirely on myself, but even on that subject I prefer to rein back my emotion so as to stop it from plunging in too far, since this is a subject that I possess at the mercy of others, and over which fortune has more rights than I do. Thus, even with health, which I value so highly, I ought not to desire and seek it so frantically as to find illnesses unbearable. ^[C] One should moderate oneself between hatred of pain and love of pleasure; Plato prescribes a middle way of life between the two.

^[B] But the emotions that distract me from myself and tie me up elsewhere—those I oppose with all my strength. My opinion is that one should •lend oneself to others but •give oneself only to oneself. If my will did find it easy to mortgage and bind itself •to others•, I could not persevere in that: by nature and habit I am too fastidious, 'Fleeing from affairs and born for untroubled leisure' [Ovid].

Stubborn earnest arguments ending in victory for my opponent. . . . might well cruelly gnaw at me. If I were to bite off as much as others do, my soul would never have the strength to bear the alarms and emotions that attend those who embrace so much; this inner agitation would immediately put it out of joint.

If I have sometimes been pressed into the management of other men's affairs, I have promised to

- take them in hand, not in lungs or liver,
- take charge of them, not incorporate them into me,
- take trouble over them, not get worked up about them.

. . . I have enough to do to order and arrange the the domestic pressures on my vitals and my veins without having there a crowd of pressures from other folk's affairs; I am concerned enough with my essential, proper and natural affairs without bringing in other people's. Those who understand how much they owe to themselves, and how many self-regarding obligations they have, find that nature has given them a full

enough commission and by no means a sinecure. You have plenty to do **at home**; don't go away.

Men put themselves up for hire. Their talents are not for themselves but for those they have enslaved themselves to. They are not **at home**; their tenants are there! This common attitude does not please me. We should husband our soul's freedom, and mortgage it only on proper occasions—of which, if we judge soundly, there are very few.

Just watch people who have been taught to let themselves be seized and carried away; they do it all the time, over small matters as over great, over things that don't affect them as well as over ones that do; they push in indiscriminately wherever there is a task and obligation; and when they are not in tumultuous agitation they are without life. ^[C] 'They are busy so as to be busy' [Seneca]. They seek occupations only so as to be occupied. It's not so much that they *want* to move as that they *cannot* keep still, exactly like a rock that has been shaken loose and cannot stop its fall until it lies on the bottom. For a certain type of man, being busy is a mark of competence and dignity. ^[B] Their minds seek repose in motion, like children in a cradle. They may be said to be as useful to their friends as they are bothersome to themselves. No-one gives his money to others, everyone gives them his time and his life. There is nothing we are more profligate with than the only things that it would be useful to us and laudable to be miserly with.

I have a completely different attitude. I keep myself to myself, and usually want *mildly* anything that I do want; and I don't want much. My involvements and occupations are similarly rare and calm. ·As for others·, whatever they want and do, they bring to it all their will and passion. There are so many bad spots that the safest way is to glide rather lightly over the surface of this world. ^[C] We should slide over it, not get bogged down in it. ^[B] Even sensual pleasure is

painful in its depths: 'You are walking through fires hidden beneath treacherous ashes' [Horace].

The municipal council of Bordeaux elected me mayor of their city when I was far from France, and even further from such a thought. I declined; but I was brought to see that I was wrong, since the King had also interposed his command. It is an office that should seem all the finer for having no salary or reward other than the honour of doing it. It lasts for two years; but it can be extended by a second election, which very rarely happens. It happened in my case, and for two others previously—some years earlier for Monsieur de Lanssac and more recently for Monsieur de Biron, Marshal of France, to whose place I succeeded; and I left mine to another Marshal of France, Monsieur de Matignon. Proud of being in such noble company: 'Each a good minister in peace and war' [Virgil]. . . .

As soon as I arrived ·in Bordeaux· I spelled out my character faithfully and truly, just as I know myself to be—with

- no memory,
- no vigilance,
- no experience,
- no vigour,

but also with

- no hatred,
- no ambition,
- no greed,
- no violence

—so that they should be informed ·about my qualities· and instructed about what they were to expect from my service. And since the only thing that had spurred them to elect me was what they knew of my late father and his honoured memory, I very clearly added that I would be distressed if anything were to press on my will as heavily as the affairs of

their city had pressed on my father's while he was governing it in the same position that I now held.

I remembered seeing him when I was a boy: an old man, cruelly troubled by the worries of office, forgetting the gentle atmosphere of his home—to which he had long been confined by the weakness of advancing years—as well as his household and his health, thinking little of his own life (which he nearly lost, having taken long and arduous journeys on their behalf). That's the kind of man he was; and this disposition in him arose from great natural goodness; there was never a soul more kindly and public-spirited.

This approach to life, which I praise in others, I do not like to follow myself, and not without some justification. He had heard it said that one should forget oneself on behalf of one's neighbour, that the individual is of no importance compared to the general.

Most of the world's rules and precepts do take this approach of pushing us out of ourselves and driving us into the market-place in the interests of the public. They thought to achieve a fine result by diverting and distracting us from ourselves, assuming that we were clinging too much to ourselves by a bond that was all too natural; and they left nothing unsaid that would favour that end. It is no novelty for sages to preach things as they serve, not as they are. ^[C] Truth has its difficulties, its awkwardnesses and its incompatibilities with us. We must often be deceived so as not to deceive ourselves, hooding our eyes and dazzling our minds so as to train them and cure them. 'It is the ignorant who judge, and they must often be deceived lest they fall into error' [Quintilian]. ^[B] When they tell us to rank three, four or fifty things above ourselves in order of preference, they are imitating the technique of the archer who, so as to hit his target, raises his sights a long way above it. To straighten a bent stick one bends it back the other way.

I reckon that in the temple of Pallas (as we see in all other religions) there were **a** open mysteries, to be revealed to the people, and **b** other hidden mysteries—higher ones—to be revealed only to initiates. It is likely that the true degree of friendship [see Glossary] that each man owes to himself is found among **b** the latter. Not a false friendship ^[C] that makes us embrace glory, learning, riches and the like with a paramount and immoderate passion,

next phrase: *comme membres de nostre estre*

rendered by all previous translators as: as (though they were) members of our being

probable meaning: as though they were organs or working parts of our bodies,

and not a friendship ^[B] that is easy-going and indiscriminating, acting like the ivy we see cracking and destroying the wall it clings to, but a healthy, measured friendship, as useful as it is pleasant. He who knows its duties and practises them. . . .has reached the pinnacle of human wisdom and of our happiness. Knowing precisely what is due to himself, this man finds •that his role includes taking account of the practices of other men and of the world; and •that to do this he must contribute to society the offices and duties that concern him. ^[C] He who does not live at all for others hardly lives for himself: 'Someone who is a friend to himself is a friend to all men' [Seneca].

^[B] The main responsibility that each of us has is for his own conduct: ^[C] that is what we are here for. ^[B] Just as someone who forgot to live a good and holy life himself and thought that he had done his duty by guiding and training others to do so would be a fool, so also anyone who gives up a healthy and cheerful life for himself in order to provide one for others makes (in my opinion) a bad and unnatural decision.

I don't want anyone to refuse to bring to the tasks that he undertakes his attention, deeds, words, and his sweat and blood if need be: 'Himself not afraid of dying for those he loves dearly or for his country' [Horace] But this a kind of incidental *loan*, the mind still remaining quiet and healthy—not without activity but without distress, without passion. Simply to be active costs him so little that he can do it in his sleep. But it must be set in motion with discretion; for whereas the body accepts the loads that are placed on it according to their real weight, the mind expands them and makes them heavier, often to its own cost, giving them whatever dimensions it thinks fit. We do similar things with different degrees of effort and tension of the will. Neither of these implies the other. For how many folk put themselves at risk every day in wars that are of no concern to them, and press forward into the danger of battles the loss of which will not disturb their next night's sleep! Whereas another man, in his own home and far from that danger (which he would not have dared to face), is more passionate about the outcome of the war, and has his soul in greater travail over it, than the soldier who is shedding his life-blood there. I have been able to engage in public duties without going a nail's breadth from myself, ^[C] and to give myself to others without taking myself away from me.

^[B] This fierceness and violence of desire hinders more than it helps the carrying out of our projects; it fills us with •impatience towards results that are slow to come or are not what we want, and with •bitterness and suspicion towards the people we are dealing with. We never conduct well the thing that obsesses and conducts us: ^[C] 'Violent impulses serve everything badly' [Stattius]. ^[B] Anyone who employs only his judgement and skill •and not his passions• proceeds more joyfully. He feints, he bends, he is comfortable about postponing when there's a need for that; he misses the target

without torment or affliction, ready and intact for a new undertaking; he always walks with the bridle in his hands. In a man who is intoxicated by a violent and tyrannical purpose, we inevitably see a great deal of imprudence and injustice; the *impetus* of his desire sweeps him along; these are reckless movements which do little good unless fortune lends them a great hand.

Philosophy tells us that when we are punishing injuries we have received we should avoid anger, not so as to lessen our revenge but (on the contrary) so that its blows may be weightier and better aimed; philosophy sees violent emotion as an impediment to that. ^[C] Anger doesn't only confuse; of itself it tires the arms of those who chastise. That fire numbs and consumes their strength. ^[B] When you are in a hurry, 'Haste causes delay' [Quintus Curtius]; haste trips itself up, hobbles and stops itself. ^[C] 'The very haste ties you in knots' [Seneca]. ^[B] For example, from what I can see to be usually the case, avarice has no greater hindrance than itself: the more tense and vigorous it is, the less productive it is. It commonly snaps up riches more quickly when masked by a semblance of generosity.

A gentleman, an excellent fellow and one of my friends, nearly drove himself out of his mind by too passionate a concern and attention to the affairs of a prince, his master; yet that master—Henry of Navarre—described himself to me as one who sees the weight of a setback as well as anyone else but who quickly resolves to put up with it in cases where there is no remedy; in other cases he orders all the necessary measures to be taken (which he can do promptly because of his quick intelligence), then quietly waits for the outcome. Indeed I have seen him doing it, remaining very cool and casual in his actions and demeanour throughout some important and ticklish engagements. I find him greater and more able in ill fortune than in good; ^[C] he gets more glory

from his defeats than from his victories, from his mourning than from his triumph.

^[B] Consider how even in activities that are vain and trivial—chess, tennis, or the like—the keen and burning involvement of a rash desire at once throws the mind into a lack of discernment and the limbs into confusion. . . . Someone who bears himself more moderately towards winning or losing is always **at home**; the less he goads himself on, and the less passionate he is about the game, the more surely and successfully he plays it.

Moreover we impede the soul's grip and grasp by giving it so many things to seize. Some things should be merely shown to it, some affixed to it, and others incorporated into it. It can see and feel all things, but should feed only on itself, and should be instructed about what properly concerns it and what is properly of its own possession and of its own substance. The laws of nature teach us what we rightly need. After the sages have told us that no man is poor by nature's standards, and that every man is poor by opinion's standards, they then subtly distinguish between **a** desires that come from nature and **b** those that come from the unruliness of our thoughts; **a** those whose limits we can see are nature's, and **b** those that flee before us and whose end we can never reach are ours. To cure poverty of possessions is easy; poverty of soul, impossible. . . . ^[C] [There follows a mostly ^[C]-tagged string of quotations and anecdotes concerning the frugality of various ancient personages. Then:]

^[B] If what nature flatly and basically requires for the preservation of our being is too little. . . ., then let us grant ourselves something further; let us also call *nature* the habits and condition of each of us; let us rate ourselves and treat ourselves by that **measure**; let us stretch our belongings and our accounts that far. For ·in going· that far we have, it seems to me, some justification. Habit is a second nature

and no less powerful ·than the first·. . . . I would almost as soon be deprived of my life as have it reduced and cut down much below the state in which I have lived it for so long.

·MONTAIGNE ON 'THE WAY OUT'·

I am no longer suited to great changes or to throwing myself into some new and unaccustomed way of life—not even a better one. It is too late to become someone else. And just as, if some great stroke of luck fell into my hands now, I would complain that it did not come at a time when I could have enjoyed it—'What is a fortune to me if I am not able to use it?' [Horace]—^[C] I would similarly complain of any new *inward* acquisition. It is almost better never to become a good man than to do so tardily, understanding how to live when one has no life ahead. I am on the way out; I would readily leave to anyone who comes along whatever wisdom I am learning about dealing with the world. I do not want even a good thing when it is too late to use it. Mustard after dinner! What good is knowledge to a man who no longer has a head? It is an insult and unkindness of fortune to offer us gifts that fill us with just indignation because they were lacking to us in their season. Guide me no further; I can go no further. All we need of the qualities that make up competence is *patience*. Give the capacity for an outstanding treble to a chorister whose lungs are diseased, or ^[B] eloquence to a hermit banished to the deserts of Arabia! No skill is required for a fall. ^[C] At the conclusion of every task the ending makes itself known. My world is done for, my form is empty; I belong entirely to the past; I am bound to acknowledge that and to conform my exit to it. . . . ^[C] [Then a paragraph in which Montaigne declares that he cannot adjust to the recently introduced reformed (Gregorian) calendar.]

Even if health, sweet as it is, happens to come to me in occasional episodes,

the rest of the sentence: c'est pour me donner regret plustost que possession de soy.

literally meaning: it is to give me regret rather than possession of it.

the thought expanded: it's not to give me the pleasure of being healthy for a while, but to make me look sadly back to my younger years when I was healthy most of the time.

I no longer have any way to take possession of it. Time is forsaking me; without time, nothing is possessed. How little I will care about those great elective dignities that are bestowed only on men who are ready to leave ·this life·! ·In awarding these positions· attention is paid not to how *well* but to how *briefly* the recipient will perform his duties. From the moment of his entry thought is being given to his exit.

[B] Here I am, in short, finishing up this man, not making another one out of him. By long usage this form of mine has turned into substance and ·my· fortune into nature.

So I maintain that each wretched one of us is excusable for counting as his own whatever is comprised within that **measure** [see page 126]. But beyond those limits, there is nothing but confusion. It—namely the sum-total of ·what is habitual to us and ·our basic condition·—is the widest extent that we can allow to our claims; the more we increase our needs and possessions the more we expose ourselves to adversities and the blows of fortune. The range of our desires should be circumscribed, restricted to the narrow limits of the most accessible and contiguous pleasures. Moreover, their course should be set not in a straight line ending somewhere else but in a small circle that starts and finishes at ourselves. Any action carried through without such a return on itself. . . is wayward and diseased—for example, the actions of the avaricious, the ambitious, and so many others who rush on and on.

Most of our occupations are low comedy: 'The whole world plays a part' [Petronius]. We should play our role properly, but as the role of a character we have adopted. We must not make a real essence out of a mask and appearance, or make our own something that comes from outside us. . . . [C] It is enough to put make-up on the face, without putting it on the heart. [B] I know some who transform and transubstantiate themselves into as many shapes, as many new *beings*, as the roles they undertake; they are prelates down to their guts and livers, and take their official positions with them even into their privy. I cannot make them see the difference between the doffing of hats that are for ·them and those that are for ·their commissions, their retinue or their ceremonial mule. 'They allow so much to their fortune that they unlearn their own natures' [Quintus Curtius]. They inflate and swell their souls and their natural speech to the height of their magistrate's [see Glossary] seat.

The mayor and Montaigne have always been *two*, with a very clear separation ·between them·. Just because one is a lawyer or a financier, one should not ignore the knavery there is in such vocations. An honest man [see Glossary] is not accountable for the crime or stupidity of his trade, and they should not make him refuse to practise it; it is the custom of his country, and there is profit in it. We must make our living from the world and make the most of it such as we find it. Yet the judgment of an emperor, ·even·, should be above ·his imperial power, seeing it and thinking of it as an extraneous accident. And the emperor should know how to enjoy himself independently of ·it, and to reveal himself—at least to himself—like any Jack or Peter.

·AGAINST PARTY ZEAL·

I cannot get so deeply and totally involved. When my ·will makes me side with one faction, it's not with such a violent

bond that my •understanding is infected by it. In the present turmoil of this state, my own interest has not made me unaware of the laudable qualities in our adversaries or the reprehensible ones in those I have followed. ^[C] People *worship* everything on their own side; for my part, I don't even *excuse* most of the things on mine. A good book does not lose its grace by arguing against my cause.

^[B] Apart from the kernel of the controversy, I have kept my equanimity and utter indifference. ^[C] 'And I have no special hatred beyond what war requires' [Pliny]. ^[B] I am pleased with myself about that, because it is usual to fail in the opposite direction. ^[C] 'Let him make use of passion who cannot make use of reason' [Cicero]. ^[B] Those who prolong their anger and hatred beyond the affair in question (as most men do) reveal that their emotion arises from something else, from some personal cause; just as when a man is cured of his ulcer but still has a fever, this shows that the fever had another more hidden cause. ^[C] The fact is that they feel no anger over the general cause's harming the interests of all men and of the state; they resent it simply because it bruises their private interest. That is why they are stung by it into a private passion that goes beyond public justice and reason: 'They did not carp about the terms as a whole but about the ones that affected them as individuals' [Livy].

^[B] I want the advantage to be on our side, but I do not fly into a frenzy if it is not. ^[C] I am firmly attached to the healthiest of the parties, but I do not want to stand out as an enemy of the others

the rest of the sentence: *outré la raison generale.*

which could mean: beyond what is generally reasonable.

or it could mean something more like: beyond the central cause that is at issue amongst us.

I absolutely condemn this bad form of arguing:

- He admires the grace of Monsieur de Guise, so he belongs to the League;
- The the activity of the king of Navarre amazes him, so he is a Huguenot;
- He finds such-and-such lacking in the *mœurs* of the king, so at heart he is a traitor.

I did not concede even to the magistrate himself that he was right to condemn a book for having included a heretic among the best poets of the age.¹ Wouldn't we be willing to say of a thief that he has a good leg? Must a whore have bad breath?

^[C] In wiser ages did they revoke the proud title Capitolinus that they had previously awarded to Marcus Manlius as the preserver of public liberty and religion? Did they smother the memory of his generosity, of his feats of arms and the military honours awarded for his valour, because he subsequently aspired to kingship, to the prejudice of his country's laws?

If they have formed a hatred for an advocate, by the next morning they think he is a poor speaker! (I have touched elsewhere on how zeal has driven decent men to similar errors. For my part I can easily say 'He does this wickedly, that virtuously.') Similarly, when the outlook or the outcome of an event is unfavourable, they want each man to be blind and stupid in his own cause, and our judgement and conviction to serve not the truth but the satisfaction of our desires. I would rather err towards the other extreme, so much do I fear being suborned by my desires. Added to which I have a rather delicate mistrust of things I hope for.

I have seen in my time amazing examples of how much and how indiscriminately peoples have let their beliefs and hopes be led and manipulated in whatever way has pleased and served their leaders, despite dozens of mistakes piled

¹ [The magistrate in this case was a papal censor; the book was Montaigne's *Essays*, books I and II.]

one upon another and despite illusions and deceptions. I am no longer surprised by those who are hoodwinked by the monkey tricks of Apollonius and Mahomet. Their sense and understanding is entirely smothered by their passion. Their power of discernment is left with no other choice but the one that smiles on them and favours their cause.

I noticed this to a supreme degree in the first of our feverish factions; this other, born subsequently, imitates and surpasses it. I noticed this to a supreme degree in the first of our feverish factions; this other, born subsequently, imitates and surpasses it.¹ Which leads me to think that this is a quality inseparable from popular errors. All opinions tumble out after the first one, whipped along like waves in the wind. If you can change your mind—if you don't bob along with all the rest—you do not belong. But it is certainly *wronging* the just parties to try to help them by fraud. I have always opposed that. It only works with sick minds; for healthy ones there are other ways of sustaining courage and explaining setbacks—ways that are not just more honest but also more effective.

[B] The heavens have never seen strife as grievous as that between Caesar and Pompey, and never will again. Yet I think I detect in these ·two· noble souls a great moderation towards each other. Theirs was a rivalry over honour and command, which •did not sweep them into frenzied and indiscriminate hatred and •was free of malignity and detraction. Even in their harshest deeds I discover some remnant of respect and good-will, leading me to conclude that each of them would have wished—if it were possible—to achieve his ends without the downfall of his fellow rather than with it. How different things were between Marius and Sylla! Take warning.

We should not rush so frantically after our emotions and

selfish interests. When I was young I resisted the advances of love, which was getting too much hold over me, and took care that it should not be so pleasing to me that it eventually overpowered me and held me entirely at its mercy; I do the same on all other occasions where my will is seized with too strong an appetite. I lean in the opposite direction. . . . and avoid fuelling the advance of the appetite's pleasure so far that I cannot regain control of it without loss and bloodshed.

[Two paragraphs about steadfastness in face of adversity: that it involves a partial blindness and is not *wholly* admirable; and that 'to measure steadfastness we must know what is suffered'—a person may be enduring something that is for him a great adversity though it might not be for us.]

·AVOIDANCE VERSUS CONFRONTATION·

[C] I have likewise deliberately avoided confusing my interests ·with those of others·; I have not sought properties adjoining those of close relatives or those to whom I am to be linked by close friendship, which usually gives rise to estrangements and dissension.

[B] I used to like games of chance with cards and dice. I gave them up for just one reason: no matter what a good face I put on on my losses, they nevertheless gave me a stab of pain. A man of honour, who must take it deeply to heart if he is insulted or given the lie, . . . should avoid letting doubtful affairs and stubborn quarrels run their course.

I shun like the plague gloomy dispositions and surly men; and as for matters that I cannot treat without self-interest or emotion, I do not get involved in them unless duty compels me to. . . . The safest way, then, is to prepare for the occasion in advance. I am well aware that some wise men have adopted a different course and haven't been afraid to grapple with many subjects, engaging themselves to the utmost.

¹ 'First, the war-party of the Reformed Church; then their confederate Roman Catholic opponents in La Ligue.' [note by Screech]

Those folk are sure of their strength, under which they take cover in all kinds of adverse events, wrestling against evils by the power of endurance: 'As a great rock, jutting out into the vast expanse of ocean, exposed to furious winds and confronting the waves, braves the menaces of sea and sky and itself remains unmoved [Virgil]. Let us not try to follow such examples: we wouldn't come up to them. These men obstinately determine to watch resolutely and unmoved the destruction of their country, which once held and governed all their affection. For our common souls there is too much effort, too much harshness, in that. It led Cato to abandon the noblest life there ever was; little men like us should flee further from the storm; we should aim to avoid feeling it, rather than aiming to endure it patiently, and •avoid blows that we would not be able to •fend off. . . .

Socrates does not say 'Do not surrender to the attraction of beauty; resist it; struggle against it.' He says, 'Flee it; run from its sight and from any encounter with it, as from a potent poison that darts and strikes from afar.' ^[C]And his good disciple [Xenophon], •reporting on the rare perfections of Cyrus the Great (or •imagining them, though I think this less likely), portrays him as distrusting his ability to resist the attractions of the heavenly beauty of his captive the illustrious Panthea, and assigning the tasks of visiting her and guarding her to a man who was less at liberty than he was. ^[B]And from the Holy Ghost the same thing: 'Lead us not into temptation.' We do not pray that our reason may not be assailed and overcome by lust, but that it may not even be tested by it. . . .

•AGAINST LETTING EMOTIONAL STORMS START•

•He who wishes his country well (as I do) without getting ulcers or growing thin over it will be unhappy but not stunned when he sees it threatened with ruin or or with

conditions of survival that are no less ruinous. . . .

•He who does not gape after the favours of princes, as after something he cannot live without, is not greatly stung by the coldness of their reception or by the fickleness of their wills.

•He who does not brood over his children or his honours with a slavish fondness still lives comfortably after he has lost them.

•He who acts well mainly for his own satisfaction is not much upset by seeing men judge his deeds contrary to his merit. A quarter of an ounce of patience provides for such annoyances. I do well by this recipe: *at the outset* I buy myself off at the cheapest price I can; and I am conscious of having by this means escaped much travail and hardship. With very little effort I stop this first movement of my emotions, abandoning the subject that is starting to weigh on me, before it sweeps me away.

•^[C] He who does not prevent the start has no chance to prevent the race.

•He who cannot slam the door against emotions will never chase them out once they are in.

•He who cannot rid himself of the beginning will not rid himself of the end. . . .

^[B] I feel in time the little breezes that come to test me and murmur within me, as forerunners of gales: 'The mind is shaken long before it is overwhelmed' [Seneca]

How often I have done myself a very evident injustice so as to avoid the risk of receiving even worse injustice from the judges after years of vexations and of vile and dirty practices that are more hostile to my nature than the rack or pyre!

^[C] 'It is proper to shun lawsuits as much as is permissible, and perhaps even a little more than is permissible. To waive one's rights a little is not only gentlemanly but also sometimes profitable' [Cicero]. If we were truly wise we should

delight in it and boast about it, like the innocent son of a great house whom I heard happily welcoming each guest with ‘Mother has just •lost her lawsuit’, as though her lawsuit were a cough or a fever or something else troublesome to •keep. Even the favours that fortune might have given me—kinships and ties with men who have supreme authority over matters of that kind—I have very conscientiously and insistently avoided using to the detriment of anyone else or to inflate my rights beyond their rightful worth.

[B] In short, I have managed so well by my daily efforts that I can proudly announce *Here I am, •virgin of lawsuits*—though they have often offered themselves to my service with just title, if I had been willing to listen to them—and *•virgin of actions against me!* So I shall soon have completed a long life without serious offence received or given, and—a rare gift of heaven—without having heard •applied to me• anything worse than my name.

Our greatest agitations have ridiculous springs and causes. What a disaster our last Duke of Burgundy suffered because of a quarrel about a cartload of sheepskins! And wasn’t the engraving on a seal the original and dominating cause of the most horrifying disaster that this machine—the world—has ever suffered? (For Pompey and Caesar are only the offshoots and the sequel of the other two •rivals, Marius and Sulla•.) And in my own day I have seen the wisest heads in this kingdom assembled with great ceremony and public expense to make treaties and agreements, while the real decisions depended absolutely on talk in the ladies’ drawing-room and on the inclination of some little woman.

[C] The poets understood this well when they put all Greece and Asia to fire and sword for an apple.

[B] See why that man over there takes his sword and dagger and risks his life and honour; let him tell you the source of the quarrel: he can’t do it without blushing, the occasion

being so trivial. At the outset, all you need is a little reflection; but once you have embarked, all the ropes pull tight. There’s a need then for great precautions, much more difficult and important ones.

How much easier it is to *keep* out than to *get* out! We should begin gently and coolly, saving our breath and our vigorous efforts for the culmination of the business. We guide affairs in their beginnings, holding them in our power; but once they are under way it is *they* that guide *us*; they sweep us along, and we have to follow them.

[C] Yet this is not to say that •this plan has relieved me of all difficulty, and that I haven’t often had trouble curbing and bridling my passions. They are not always governed according to the importance of the occasion, and even their beginnings are often harsh and aggressive. Nevertheless there are fair savings and some profit to be derived from •it, except for those whom no profit can satisfy if •their• reputation is not involved. For in truth such an upshot is valued only by each man in himself. If you reformed yourself before you joined in the dance, before the matter came into •public• view, you are happier for it but not more admired •by others•. Not merely in this but in all life’s other duties, the road of those who aim at honour is very different from the one followed by those whose goal is order and reason.

[B] I find some who enter the lists heedlessly and furiously only to slow down during the charge. Just as, according to Plutarch,

those who are led by false shame to be soft and easy in agreeing to anything that is asked of them are afterwards easy in breaking their word and recanting, so also

anyone who enters lightly upon a quarrel is liable to be equally light in getting out of it.

The same difficulty that stops me from getting into it would

spur me on once I was heated and excited. . . . ^[B] From lack of wisdom men fall back into lack of courage, which is even more indefensible.

•FEEBLE AND DISHONEST PEACE-SEEKING•

These days most settlements of our disputes are shameful and dishonest: we merely seek to save appearances, while betraying and disowning our true intentions. [Take what follows as addressed to this situation: I call you a liar; you are indignant, and a nasty quarrel seems to be brewing; I try to calm it down by saying 'No, I didn't call you a liar; that's not what I meant', and so on. In the interests of peace, I am feebly lying about myself.] We plaster over the deed; we know how we said it and what we meant by it; the bystanders know it; so do our friends whom we wanted to sense our superiority. We disavow our thoughts and seek bolt-holes in falsehood so as to reach a conciliation; and we do this at the expense of our frankness and our reputation for courage. We give the lie to ourselves, so as to avoid admitting that we gave the lie to somebody else.

You ought not to be considering •whether your action or your words may be given a different interpretation; from now on it is *your* true and honest interpretation that you should maintain, whatever it costs you. Your virtue and your conscience are being addressed; these are not parts to be protected behind a mask. Let us leave •these vile means and expedients to the chicanery of the law-courts. The excuses and reparations that I see constantly being made to purge an indiscretion seem to me uglier than the indiscretion itself. Offending your adversary again would be better than offending against yourself by making such amends to him. You defied him when you were moved to anger; now that you are cool and more sensible, you are going to appease him and flatter him! That way, you retreat further than you had advanced. . . .

For me passions are as easy to avoid as they are hard to moderate: ^[C] 'They are more easily cut out from the mind than tempered' [attributed to Seneca]. ^[B] He who cannot attain to that noble Stoic impassibility, let him take refuge in the bosom of this plebeian insensitivity of mine. What the Stoics did by virtue I train myself to do by disposition. The middle region harbours the tempests; philosophers and rustics—the two extremes—concur in tranquility and happiness. 'Blessed the man who can find out the causes of things, who can trample down all fears of inexorable fate and the howls of Acheron. And blessed he who knows the rustic gods, Pan, old Sylvanus and the sister nymphs.' [Virgil]

All things are feeble and weak at their birth. However, we must keep our eyes open at their beginnings; just as at that time we don't find the danger because it is so small, once it has grown we don't find the cure. In an ambitious career I would have encountered, daily, thousands of irritations harder to digest than the distress I had in putting a stop to my natural inclination towards ambition. . . .

•MONTAIGNE'S CONDUCT AS A MAYOR•

All public actions are subject to ambiguous and diverse interpretations, for too many heads judge concerning them. Now about this municipal office of mine (and I am glad to say a word about it, not that it's worth it, but to exhibit my *mœurs* in such matters): some say that I conducted myself as a man who exerts himself too weakly and whose zeal is too slack. And they are not at all far from having a case. I try to keep my soul and my thoughts in repose: ^[C] 'Always tranquil by nature, I now am now even more so with age' [Cicero]. ^[B] . . . But from this natural languor of mine one should not infer •incompetence (for lack of assiduity and lack of wit are two different things), let alone •ingratitude or of lack of appreciation towards those citizens •of Bordeaux• who did

everything in their power to gratify me, both before they knew me and after—for they did much more for me in renewing my appointment than in giving it to me in the first place. I wish them all possible good; and indeed, if the occasion had arisen, there is nothing I would have spared in their service. I bestirred myself for them as I do for myself. . . .

People also say that my administration passed without ·leaving· a trace or mark. Good lord! I am accused of inactivity at a time when nearly everyone was convicted of doing too much! I stamp around vigorously when my will sweeps me along; but that trait is an enemy to perseverance. If someone wants to use me as I am, let him give me tasks requiring vigour and freedom as well as straightforward, brief and even hazardous conduct. In those I can do something. For a task requiring subtle, laborious, artificial and tortuous handling he had better ask someone else.

Not all important commissions are difficult. I was prepared to work a little harder if there had been any great need for that; for I am capable of doing somewhat more than I do or than I like to do. To the best of my knowledge I never left undone any action that duty genuinely required of me. I readily forgot those that ambition mixes up with duty and covers with its name. Those are the ones that most often fill men's eyes and ears and satisfy them; they are bought off with the appearance, not with the thing itself. If they do not hear a sound, they think you are asleep!

My own humours are opposed to noisy ones. I could easily quell a disturbance while remaining undisturbed, and punish a riot without losing my temper. Do I need anger and fire? I borrow it and wear it as a mask. My *mœurs* are mild, tame rather than fierce. I do not condemn a magistrate who dozes, provided that those who are under him doze too; ·that is how· the laws also doze.

Personally I favour a gliding, obscure and quiet life,

[C] 'neither submissive and abject nor overbearing' [Cicero].
[B] That is how my fortune wills it; I was born into a family that has flowed on without glamour and without turbulence, a family always ambitious for integrity. Nowadays men are so conditioned to agitation and ostentation that there is no longer any sense of goodness, moderation, calmness, steadfastness and ·other· such quiet and unpretentious qualities.

- Rough objects are felt; smooth ones are handled without sensation.
- Illness is felt; good health little or not at all.
- We feel things that charm [*oignent*] us less than those that harm [*poignent*] us.

If we postpone something that could be done in the council-chamber until it is done in the market-square, if we keep back till noon something that could have been done the night before, or if we are anxious to do ourselves something that a colleague could have done just as well, then we are acting for the sake of our own reputation and for private advantage, not for the good. . . .

·AGAINST AMBITION·

Ambition is not a vice fit for little fellows or for enterprises such as ours. Alexander was told: 'Your father will leave you wide dominions, peaceful and secure.' That boy was envious of his father's victories and of the justice of his government. He would not have wanted to enjoy ruling the entire world softly and peacefully. . . .

Ambition is doubtless a pardonable malady in such a strong and full soul ·as Alexander's·. But when petty, dwarfish souls start aping it, believing they can scatter their renown abroad by having •judged one matter rightly or •continued the order of the guard at one of the town gates, the higher they hope to raise their heads the more they bare

their behinds. Such petty achievements have no body, no life; they vanish at the first telling and travel only from one street corner to the next. Entertain your son or your valet with them boldly, like that ancient who, having no-one else to listen to his praises or acknowledge his value, boasted to his chambermaid: 'Oh, what a gallant and clever man you have for a master, Perrette!' Entertain yourself with them, if that's the best you can do, like a councillor I know who, having (with extreme exertion and matching ineptitude) disgorged a boatload of paragraphs, withdrew from the council chamber to the palace urinal, where he was heard devoutly muttering through his teeth: 'Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name be the glory' [from Psalm 115]. Anyone who cannot get it from anyone else, let him pay himself from his own purse.

Fame does not play the whore for so low a price. The rare and exemplary deeds that deserve fame would not tolerate the company of that innumerable crowd of petty everyday actions. •Marble will boast your titles as much as you like for having had a stretch of wall repaired or a public gutter cleaned, but •men of sense will not. Reputation does not follow a good deed unless there is something difficult and unusual about it. Indeed, according to the Stoics, mere esteem is not due to every action born of virtue; they would not allow bare thanks to a man who for temperance's sake abstains from a blear-eyed old woman. . . .

We have pleasures appropriate to our lot; let us not usurp those of greatness. Just because ours are more humble, they are more natural and more solid and certain. If we don't reject ambition out of a sense of right and wrong, let us at least do it out of ambition! •Ambitiously seeking fame or reputation is actually bad for one's reputation•. Let us despise that base beggarly hunger for renown and honour that makes us beg abjectly for them from all kinds of people,

no matter how vile the price: [C] 'What kind of praise is it that you can order from the butcher's?' [Cicero]. [B] To be honoured thus is a dishonour.

Let us learn to be no more avid for glory than we deserve. Boasting of every useful or blameless action is for men in whom such things are rare and unusual: they want them to be valued at what they cost them! The more brilliant a good deed is the *less* value I put upon it, because of my suspicion that it was paraded more for brilliance than for goodness. . . . The most graceful deeds are those that slip from the doer's hand casually and silently, and that some honest man later picks out and saves from obscurity, bringing them to light for their own sake. [C] 'Personally I always find more praiseworthy whatever is done without ostentation and without public witnesses' says the most vainglorious man in the world! [Cicero]

•RETURNING TO MONTAIGNE'S CONDUCT AS MAYOR•

[B] [Picking up from, perhaps, '. . . better ask someone else.' on page 133.] All I had to do was to preserve things and to survive, which are dull and unnoticeable tasks. There is splendour in innovation, but that is under a ban at the present time, when we are hard-pressed and must defend ourselves *against* novelties. [C] •Abstaining from doing is often as noble as doing, though it is less in the daylight; what little I am worth is virtually all on •that side.

[B] In short, my opportunities while in office accorded with my temperament, for which I am most grateful to them. Is there anyone who wants to be ill so as to provide work for his doctor? And shouldn't we whip a doctor who wished us the plague so as to put his skill into practice? I have not had that wicked and quite common attitude of wanting trouble and malady to infect this city's affairs so as to exalt and honour my government. I heartily lent a shoulder to make

those affairs smooth and easy.

Anyone who will not be grateful to me for the gentle, quiet calm that accompanied my administration must at least grant me the gratitude that belongs to me by title ·not of my virtue, but· of my good fortune. And I am so made that I like as well to be fortunate as to be wise, owing my success to God's grace rather than to the intervention of my labours.

I had proclaimed elaborately enough to the world my inadequacy for handling such public affairs. I have something worse than inadequacy: that I hardly mind it and, in view of

the kind of life I have designed for myself, hardly try to cure it. I was not satisfied, either, with my conduct of affairs: but I did accomplish pretty much everything I promised myself I would, and I far exceeded what I promised to those I was to deal with, since I prefer to promise rather less than I can do and hope to do. I am sure I left no injury or hatred behind me.

As for leaving regret ·over my absence· and desire for me ·to return·. I know that I never much cared about that. . . .

11. Cripples

[This essay is mostly about credulity, especially regarding miracles and witches. The title Montaigne gives it becomes relevant only on its last two pages, which he admits may be ‘off the point’.]

·THE IMPERFECTIONS OF HUMAN REASON·

[B] Two or three years ago they shortened the year by ten days in France. What changes were supposed to result from this reform! It was literally moving heaven and earth at the same time. Yet nothing has been shoved out of place. My neighbours find the time for sowing and reaping, the opportune moment for their business, harmful and propitious days, at precisely the same point ·in the year· to which they have always been assigned. The error of our ·previous· practices was not felt, and the amendment in them is not felt now. So much uncertainty there is everywhere, so gross is our ·faculty of· perception, [C] so darkened and so blunt.

[B] [Then a paragraph about how the calendar adjustment could have been made ‘less inconvenient’.] Years are our only measure for time. The world has been using this measure for many centuries, yet it is a unit that we have not succeeded in standardising; we live in daily uncertainty about the various forms given to it by other nations, and how they apply them.

And what if (as some say) the heavens are contracting in on us as they age, throwing us into uncertainty even about hours and days? And about months, since Plutarch says that even in his day *l’astrologie* [here = ‘astrology and astronomy’] had not been able to determine the motions of the moon? A fine position we are in to keep chronicles of past events!

I was just now letting my mind range randomly (as I

often do) over what an unfettered and imprecise instrument human reason is. I see that when you put ‘facts’ before men, they usually prefer to spend time finding reasons for them rather than finding whether they are true. They ignore the things and devote themselves to the causes. [C] Comical prattlers!¹

The knowledge of causes belongs only to him who has the guidance of things, not to us to whom things *happen* and who have the perfectly full use of them according to our nature, without penetrating to their origin and essence. Wine is no more delightful to the man who knows its primary qualities. On the contrary, both the body and the soul disturb and spoil their right to make use of the world by mixing into it the pretensions of learning. Determining and knowing are—like •giving—the province of rule and mastery; enjoying and •accepting are the province of inferiority, subordination and apprenticeship. Let us get back to that custom of ours.

[B] They skip over the facts but assiduously examine their causes.² They normally begin by asking ‘How does this come about?’, but they ought to be asking ‘Does this come about?’. Our reasoning power has power to fill out a hundred other worlds and discover their principles and construction! It has no need for matter or foundation; let it run on; it can build as well on the void as on the plenum, on space as on matter: ‘Suited to give solidity to smoke’ [Persius].

I find that in almost every case we ought to say ‘That’s just wrong!’; I would often make that reply, but I don’t venture to because they cry out that this is an evasion produced by weakness of intellect and by ignorance. I am usually obliged to play the fool for company’s sake, and to discuss trivial subjects and tales that I totally disbelieve. Besides, it is a

¹ [The French is *Plaisants causeurs*, in which *causeurs* means ‘speakers’ but also plays on *causes* = ‘causes’.]

² [The original says *consequences*, but this is presumably a slip.]

bit rude and quarrelsome to flatly deny a factual statement. And few people fail—especially in matters where it is hard to convince others—to assert that they have seen it themselves or to cite witnesses whose authority puts a stop (·they think·) to our contradiction. In this way we know the foundations and causes of a thousand things that never were; and the world scuffles over a thousand questions of which both the pro and the con are false: [C] ‘The false and the true are so close to one another that the wise man should not trust himself to so steep a slope’ [Cicero]. [B] Truth and falsehood are alike in form of face and similar in bearing, taste and movement; we look on them with the same eye.

·SPREADING BELIEF IN MIRACLES·

I find that we are not merely slack about guarding ourselves from deception but anxious to fall on its sword. We love to be entangled with vanity [see Glossary], since it corresponds in form to our own being.

I have seen the birth of several miracles in my time. Even if they are smothered at birth, we can still predict the course they would have taken if they had lived out their full age. It is only a matter of finding the end of the thread and then unwinding as much of it as we want. And the distance between •nothing and •the smallest thing in the world is greater than the distance between •the latter and •the largest.

Now, the first people who are convinced of a strange initial fact, when they come to spread their tale abroad, can tell by the opposition they arouse what it is that others find difficult to accept; they then cover that gap with some false patch. [C] Moreover, ‘by man’s inborn tendency to work hard at feeding rumours’ [Virgil], we naturally feel scruples about returning what has been lent to us without adding some interest from our own stock. At first the individual error creates the public one; and then in turn the public error

creates the individual one. [B] Thus, this whole structure is padded out and reshaped as it passes from hand to hand, so that the most far-off witness is better informed about it than the closest one, and the last to be told is more convinced than the first. It is a natural progression.

For whoever believes anything reckons that it is a work of charity to convince someone else of it; and to do this he is not afraid to add, out of his own invention, whatever his story needs to overcome resistance to it and to make sure that the other man understands it correctly.

I myself am particularly scrupulous about lying and don’t care much whether what I say is believed or respected, yet I notice that when I get heated about a matter I have in hand—[C] either because of another’s resistance or because of the excitement of the actual telling—[B] I magnify and inflate my subject by tone of voice, gestures, powerful and vigorous words—and also by stretching it and filling it in, not without prejudice to the simple truth. But I do so with this condition: as soon as someone catches me up and demands the naked and unvarnished truth, I immediately give up the effort and give him the truth, without exaggeration, without over-emphasis and padding. [C] A lively and noisy way of speaking, such as mine ordinarily is, soon flies off into hyperbole.

[B] There is nothing that men commonly work harder at than making a way for their opinions. Where the ordinary means fail us we bring in command, force, sword, and fire. It is wretched to reach the point where the best touchstone of truth is the number of believers in a crowd where the fools so greatly outnumber the wise: [C] ‘As if anything whatsoever were as common as lack of wisdom’ [Cicero]; ‘A fine evidence of sanity is the mob of lunatics!’ [St Augustine]. [B] It is hard to set one’s judgement against accepted opinions. The first conviction, taken from the subject itself, seizes the

simple folk; from them it spreads to able people through the authority of the **a** number and **b** antiquity of the testimonies. For my part, what I would not believe when one person says it I would not believe if **a** a hundred said it. And I do not judge opinions **b** by their age.

Not long ago one of our princes, whose fine constitution and lively disposition had been undermined by the gout, let himself be convinced by the report that was circulating about the wonderful treatments of a priest who by means of words and gestures cured all illnesses—so strongly convinced that he made a long journey to go and consult him. By the force of his imagination he persuaded his legs and put them to sleep [meaning: to feel no pain] for a few hours, so that he got from them a service that they had long since forgotten how to do. If fortune had allowed five or six such events to accumulate, they could have made this miracle a part of nature! People later found the inventor of this treatment to be so simple-minded and so unskillful that he was judged not worthy of any punishment. We would do the same for most such things if we tracked them into their lair. ^[C] ‘We are amazed by things that deceive us by their remoteness’ [Seneca]. . . .

It is a marvel how many empty beginnings and trivial causes give rise to such celebrated opinions. That is precisely what impedes inquiry into them. For while we are looking for powerful and weighty causes and ends worthy of such great fame we lose the real causes, which are so tiny that they escape our view. And indeed such investigations require a very wise, diligent and subtle investigator, one who is not partial or prejudiced.

Up to now all these miracles and strange happenings have hidden when I have been present. I have not seen ·out there· in the world any clearer example of the miraculous and monstrous than I am. Time and custom condition us

to anything strange; but the more I keep company with myself and know myself, the more astonished I am at my misshapeness and the less I understand myself.

[A long passage describing something that happened in a village not far from Montaigne’s home: Some young people fooled the villagers into thinking they had been visited by ghosts, and the fame of this spread through several provinces and brought people pouring into the village. The deception was discovered, and the perpetrators gaoled. But, Montaigne continues:] In many similar kinds of case that surpass our knowledge, I consider that we should suspend our judgement, neither believing nor rejecting.

Many of this world’s abuses are engendered—^[C] or to put it more boldly, *all* of this world’s abuses are engendered—^[B] by our being •schooled to fear to admit our ignorance ^[C] and •required to accept anything we cannot refute. ^[B] We talk about everything

the rest of the sentence: *par precepte et resolution.*

translated by Florio as: by precepts and resolution.

by Cotton: by precepts and decisions.

by Frame: didactically and dogmatically.

by Screech: by injunction and assertion.

Take your pick!

In Rome, the ·legal· style required that even the testimony of an eye-witness or the sentence of a judge based on his most certain knowledge had to be expressed in the formula ‘It seems to me’. I hate things that are probable when they are thrust on me as infallible. I like these expressions that soften and moderate the rashness of our assertions: ‘perhaps’, ‘to some extent’, ‘some’, ‘they say’, ‘I think’, and the like. And if I had sons to bring up I would fill their mouths with ^[C] inquiring and undecided ^[B] expressions such as

- ‘What does this mean?’
- ‘I do not understand that’,
- ‘It might be so’,
- ‘Is that true?’

—doing this so thoroughly they would be more likely to retain the manners of learners at 60 than (as boys actually do) to act like professors at 10. He who wants to be cured of ignorance must first admit to it. [C] . . . Wonder is the foundation of all philosophy, inquiry its way of advancing, and ignorance its end.

·PRAISEWORTHY IGNORANCE·

[B] Yes indeed: there is a strong and magnanimous kind of ignorance that in honour and courage is not inferior to knowledge. . . .

[Montaigne read years ago about a trial in which two men both claimed to be a peasant named Martin Guerre. One was found guilty and sentenced to death, a sentence that Montaigne thinks was rash, given that the judge declared the impersonation to be amazing and outside the range of his or anyone else’s experience. He concludes that room should be made for a ‘verdict’ saying ‘The court understands nothing in this case’.]

The witches of my neighbourhood are in mortal danger every time some new author comes along and attests to the reality of their visions. The word of God provides us with absolutely certain and uncontrovertible examples of such things, but to adapt them and apply them to things happening in our own times—when we don’t know what caused them or how they were done—needs a different kind of ingenuity from any that we possess. Perhaps only

that almighty witness¹ has the role of telling us ‘This is an example of it; so is that; this other is not.’ God ought to be believed in these matters—that really is right—but that does not hold for one of ourselves who is amazed (as he must be if he is not out of his senses) by his own narration, whether testifying about others or against himself.²

I am sluggish, and tend to hold to the solid and the probable, avoiding the ancient reproaches:

- ‘Men put more trust in whatever they do not understand’ [Pliny].
- ‘The human mind’s greed makes it more ready to believe whatever is obscure’ [Tacitus].

I am well aware that folk get angry and forbid me to have any doubts about witches on pain of execrable insults. A new form of persuasion! Thank God my belief is not controlled by thumps from anyone’s fists. Let them bully those who accuse their opinion of being false; I merely accuse it of being problematic and rash; as for the assertion that it is false, I join them in condemning that, though less imperiously. . . .

Any man who supports his argument with bravado and commands shows that its reasoning is weak. In a verbal and scholastic disputation, they—those who believe in witchcraft—may have as convincing a case as their opponents do; but in the practical consequences they draw from it, the advantages are all with the opponents.

To kill people, there must be sharp and brilliant clarity; this life of ours is too real, too fundamental, to be used to guarantee these supernatural and imagined events. As for witches whose means are not supernatural but drugs and poisons, I leave them out of account; they are homicides, and of the worst sort. Yet even there it is said that we should

¹ The Holy Ghost who, for Montaigne, was the author of Scripture. [note by Screech]

² [The personal pronouns in this sentence should be understood as covering women as well as men.]

not always be content with the confessions of such folk, for they have been known to accuse themselves of killing people who were later found alive and well. As for those other extravagant accusations, I want to say that any man—no matter how highly esteemed he is—should be believed only about human matters; in the case of whatever is beyond his comprehension and produces supernatural results he should be believed only when supernatural authority confirms it. That privilege that it has pleased God to grant to some of our testimonies should not be cheapened or passed around casually. My ears are battered by stories like this:

Three men saw him on such-and-such a day in the east; three saw him the following morning in the west, at such-and-such a time, in such-and-such a place, dressed thus and so.

I would certainly not trust my own testimony over such a matter. How much more natural and probable it seems to me that •two men should lie than that •in twelve hours one man should go like the wind from east to west! How much more natural that •our understanding should be pulled from its moorings by the volatility of our mind [*esprit*] going off its tracks than that •one of us •humans•, in flesh and blood, should be sent flying on a broomstick up the flue of his chimney by an **external** spirit [*esprit*]! We, who are perpetually agitated by our own home-grown illusions, should not go looking for unknown ones **outside ourselves** . It seems to me that it is excusable to disbelieve any wonder, at least in so far as we can divert it and explain it in some non-miraculous way. I am of Saint Augustine's opinion, that in things hard to prove and dangerous to believe it is better to lean towards doubt than towards confidence.

•THE PUNISHMENT OF WITCHES•

A few years ago I was passing through the domains of a sovereign prince who, as a favour to me and to beat down my incredulity, graciously allowed me to see, in a private place when he was present, ten or twelve prisoners of this kind, •i.e. ones accused of witchcraft•. Among them was an old woman, truly a witch as far as ugliness and deformity were concerned, who had long been very famous in that profession. I saw evidence and voluntary confessions. . . .; I talked •with her• and questioned •her• all I wanted, bringing to bear the soundest attention that I could—and I am hardly the man to let my judgement to be muzzled by preconceptions, In the end, and in all honesty, I would have prescribed not hemlock for them but hellebore.¹ [C] 'It seemed to be more a matter of insane minds than of delinquency' [Livy]. [B] Justice has its own remedies for such maladies.

As for the objections and arguments that •honest men [see Glossary] have put to me on that and many other occasions, none ever seemed to tie me fast: all seemed to have a solution more convincing than •their conclusions. It is true indeed that I don't try to disentangle proofs and reasons based on experience and on fact; they have no ends; so, like Alexander with his knot, I often slice through them. After all, it is putting a very high value on one's surmises to roast a man alive because of them.

[A passage in which Montaigne vigorously expresses his opinion that no-one should be punished for being a witch, and equally vigorously declares that this is only an *opinion* on a topic on which he has no expertise. He continues:] [C] I warrant you no certainty for whatever I say, except that it was indeed in my vacillating and disorderly thought at the time I spoke. I talk about everything by way of conversation, about

¹ [That is, not a drug used in ancient times to execute criminals but one used to cure insanity.]

nothing by way of advice. 'Nor am I, as those other fellows are, ashamed to admit that I do not know what I do not know [Cicero]. [B] I would not be so forthcoming with speech if it were my right to be believed on this matter. When a great nobleman complained of the sharpness and vehemence of my exhortations, I replied thus:

'Knowing that you are braced and prepared on one side, I set out the other side for you as thoroughly as I can, not to compel your judgement but to give it some light. God holds your heart, and will provide you with options. I am not so presumptuous as even to *want* my opinions to tip the balance in a matter of such importance; my fortune has not trained them for such powerful and exalted decisions.'

I have not only many character-traits but also quite a few opinions that I would willingly train a son of mine (if I had one) to dislike. The make-up of a man (-including my supposed son as an adult-) is so *sauvage* [= wild, barbarous, untamed] that even the truest opinions are not always the most appropriate for him.

·CRIPPLES·

On the point or off the point, no matter: it is said as a common proverb in Italy that he who has not lain with a crippled woman does not know Venus in her sweet perfection. Fortune, or some particular incident, long ago put that saying into the mouth of the people; and it is said of males as well as of females, for the Queen of the Amazons retorted to the Scythian who courted her 'The crippled man does it best.'¹ In that feminine republic, to escape the dominance of males, they disabled them from childhood—arms, legs, and

other parts that gave males an advantage over them—and made use of men only for the purpose for which we make use of women over here.

I would have said that the erratic movements of the crippled woman brought some new pleasure to the business and some spice of sweetness to those who try it; but I have just learned that ancient philosophy itself has decided the question. It says that the legs and thighs of crippled women do not receive (being imperfect) the nourishment that is their due, so that the genital organs that are sited above them become more developed, better fed and more vigorous. Or else that since this defect discourages exercise, those who are marked by it dissipate their strength less and so come more whole to Venus' sports. Which is also the reason why the Greeks disparaged women who worked at the loom, saying they were lustier than others because of their sedentary occupation which is without much physical exertion. At this rate, what can we not reason about! Of those women weavers I might also say that the shuttling to and fro that their work imposes on them while they are squatting down stimulates and arouses them, as the shaking and jerking of coaches arouses the ladies ·who ride in them·.

Do not these examples serve to prove what I said at the outset,² namely that our reasons often run ahead of the facts and extend their jurisdiction in such a limitless way that they exercise themselves and pass judgements even about inanity and things that don't exist? Not only are our inventive powers agile in creating reasons for all sorts of idle fancies, but our imagination finds it just as easy to receive impressions from the very unreliable appearances given by falsehood. For on the sole authority of the ancient

¹ [This is a Greek proverb. Montaigne gives it first in Greek—*arista cholos oiphei*—then in French.]

² [[This refers to the passage starting 'I was just now letting my mind range randomly' on page 136.]

and widespread currency of that saying ‘that cripples do it better’, I once made myself believe that I had received more pleasure from a woman because she was crook-backed and counted that as one of her charms.

In his comparison between France and Italy, Torquato Tasso says he has noticed that we have skinnier legs than the Italian gentlemen, and says the cause of this is our continually being on horseback; which is the very same ‘cause’ that leads Suetonius to the opposite conclusion, for he says on the contrary that Germanicus had made his legs stouter by continuing this same exercise!

There is nothing so supple and erratic as our understanding. [Montaigne develops this thought with an obscure half-page of ancient quotations and anecdotes. Then:] Aesop was put on sale with two other slaves. The purchaser asked the first what he could do: he, to enhance his value, promised mountains and marvels; he could do this and he could do that. The second said as much or more of himself. When it was Aesop’s turn to be asked what he could do he said, ‘Nothing! These two have taken possession of the whole territory; they know everything!’

That is what has happened in the school of philosophy. The arrogance of those who attributed to the human mind a capacity for everything produced in others—through **a** disdain and **b** emulation¹—the opinion that the human mind has a capacity for nothing. Some went to the same extreme about ignorance as the others did about knowledge; so it can’t be denied that man is immoderate in all things, and has no stopping-point except one forced on him by his being *unable* to go any further.

12. Physiognomy

[This essay’s title is appropriate only for its pages 155–157.]

•THE GREATNESS OF SOCRATES•

[B] Virtually all our opinions come •through authority and on trust. That is no bad thing: at a time as feeble as the present, we could not do worse than to choose •through ourselves. The version of Socrates’ sayings that his friends have left us receives our approval only out of respect for the general approval •of them•, not on the basis of our own knowledge. They do not square with our tastes and practices; if something like them were produced nowadays there are few men who would prize it.

The only graces we appreciate are ones that are sharpened, puffed out and inflated by artifice. Ones that flow along •naturally and simply easily escape the notice of a sight as coarse as ours is. They have a delicate and hidden beauty; we need a clear and well-purged sight to detect this secret light. For us, is not •naturalness akin to stupidity and a matter for reproach?

Socrates makes his soul move with the natural motion of the common people: thus speaks a peasant; thus speaks a woman. [C] He never has anything in his mouth but carters, joiners, cobblers and masons. [B] His inductions and comparisons are drawn from the most ordinary and familiar of men’s activities; anyone can understand him. We would never have discerned the nobility and splendour of his admirable ideas if they were presented to us in such a mean form—we [C] who consider flat and low any ideas that are not **hoisted** by learning, and [B] who perceive richness only in pomp and show. Our world is formed only for ostentation: men are filled with nothing but wind, and bounce around like

¹ [That is: **a** contempt for the ‘know everything’ opinion, and **b** a desire to match its proponents by saying something equally sweeping.]

balls. This man ·Socrates· did not deal with empty fancies; his aim was to provide us with things and precepts that serve life really and more intimately: ‘To keep the mean, to hold fast to the limit, and to follow nature’ [Lucan].

He was always one and the same, and raised himself to the highest level of vigour not by surging up but by his disposition. Or—to put it better—he did not **raise** anything, but rather brought vigour, sharpness and complications **down** and back to his inborn natural level, and subjected them to it.

In the case of Cato, we clearly see that his pace is strained far above the ordinary; in the brave actions of his life and in his death we always feel that he is mounted on his tallest horses. Socrates keeps his feet on the ground, and at a gentle and ordinary pace deals with the most useful subjects, and behaves himself, both in death and in the thorniest difficulties that can occur, in the ordinary way of human life.

It is a good thing that the man most worthy of being known and of being set before the world as an example was the one of whom we have the most certain knowledge. We have light on him from the most clear-sighted men there ever were; the witnesses we have of him are admirably faithful and competent.

It is a fine thing that he could take the pure notions of a child and—without spoiling or stretching them—order them so as to produce the most beautiful achievements of our soul. He portrays our soul as neither elevated nor rich; he portrays it simply as healthy, but certainly with a very lively and pure heath. From these commonplace natural sources, from these everyday ideas, he constructed—without excitement or fuss—beliefs, actions and *mœurs* that were not simply the best regulated but also the most sublime and most forceful there ever were. [C] It was he who brought human wisdom back down from heavens, where it was wasting its time, and

returned it to man, with whom lies its most proper, most demanding and most useful business.

[B] See him state his case before his judges; see what reasons he uses to rouse his courage for the hazards of war; what arguments strengthen his endurance when against calumny, tyranny, death, and against his wife’s bad temper; there is nothing ·in all that· that is lifted from the arts or sciences; the simplest folk recognize in it the means and powers that they already have; it is impossible to go back further or **lower** . He did a great favour to human nature by showing how much it can do by itself. We are each richer than we think.

·THE RISKS OF LEARNING·

Yet we are trained to borrow and beg! We are taught to make more use of other men’s goods than of our own. In nothing does man know how to halt at the limit of his *need*; he embraces more pleasure, wealth, power than he can hold; his greed is incapable of moderation. It is the same, I find, with ·his· desire for knowledge: he cuts out for himself much greater tasks than he needs or has any reason to pursue, [C] taking it that *all* knowledge is useful: ‘In learning as in everything else, we suffer from lack of moderation’ [Seneca]. And Tacitus is right to praise Agricola’s mother for having restrained in her son too boiling an appetite for knowledge. Looked at steadily, it has in it—as do men’s other goods—much inherent vanity and weakness. And a high cost.

Acquiring this ·food for the mind· is more hazardous than acquiring any other food or drink; for in other cases whatever we have bought we carry home in some container—which gives us time to think about its worth, and about how much of it we shall take and when. But learning can from the outset be put into no container except our soul; we swallow it

as we buy it, leaving the market-place either already infected or else improved. Some of it only burdens and hampers us instead of nourishing us; some, under pretence of curing us, poisons us.

[B] I have enjoyed seeing men somewhere being led by piety to make vows of ignorance. like vows of chastity, poverty, penitence. It is a castrating of our disordered desires to •blunt the cupidity that goads us towards the study of books, and •deprive the soul of the pleasurable self-satisfaction that tickles us with the opinion that we know something . [C] And it is to fulfil the vow of poverty abundantly by including in it poverty of the mind.

[B] We need hardly any learning to live at our ease. And Socrates teaches us that this learning lies within us, as well as how to find it there and how to get help from it. All the ability of ours for exceeding what is natural is pretty much vain and superfluous. The best we can hope for from it is that it won't burden and bother us more than it serves us. [C] 'Little learning is needed to form a good mind' [Seneca]. [B] They are feverish excesses of our mind, a tempestuous and unquiet instrument.

Survey yourself. You will find within you nature's arguments against death—true ones that are fittest to serve you when you need them. They are the ones that make a peasant, and entire nations, die as steadfastly as a philosopher. [C] Would I have died less cheerfully before reading the *Tusculan Disputations*?¹ I think not. And now that I find myself confronting death, I realise that my •tongue has been enriched •by reading this work• but not at all my •courage. This is as nature made it for me, and arms itself for the

conflict in a common and ordinary way. Books have been useful to me less for instruction than for exercise.

[A passage holding forth against the ways in which books try to arm us against natural ills but actually make those ills seem worse by dwelling on them. Empty as most of those arguments are, Montaigne won't attack them in detail, because they are not entirely worthless. Still, in treating them patiently] [B] we must be careful not to call *strength* what is only good breeding, or *solid* what is only clever, or *good* what is only handsome. Not everything that entertains us sustains us [*Tout ce qui plaist ne paist pas.*]

[B] Seeing the exertions a Seneca imposed on himself to be prepared for death—seeing him sweat from the exertion of steeling and reassuring himself and defend himself for so long on his perch—would have shaken his reputation with me if he had not maintained it so valiantly as he was dying. His burning emotion, so often repeated, [C] shows that he himself was ardent and impetuous² and also [B] shows that he was to some extent hard pressed by his adversary. b Plutarch's manner, being more disdainful •of death• and more relaxed, is in my view correspondingly more manly and persuasive: I could easily believe that his soul's movements were more assured and more regulated. a One, sharper, pricks and startles us, touches the mind [*l'esprit*] more. b The other more sedate, constantly forms us, settles and fortifies us, touches the understanding [*l'entendement*] more. [C] The former delights our judgement; the latter wins it.

I have likewise seen even more hallowed writings which, in their portrayal of the conflict sustained against the prickings of the flesh, represent them as so sharp, so strong and

¹ [A work of Cicero's, the first book of which concerns contempt of death.]

² [Montaigne inserts here: 'We must convict him out of his own mouth', and quotes Seneca as saying 'A great soul speaks with more calm and assurance' and 'There is not one colour for the intellect, another for the soul']

invincible, that we who are of the common herd have as much to wonder at in the strangeness and unheard-of power of their temptation as in their resistance to it.

[B] Why do we go on protecting ourselves with these efforts of learning? Let us look on the earth and the poor folk we see scattered over it, heads bowed over their toil, who know nothing of Aristotle or Cato or example or precept. From them nature every day draws deeds of constancy and steadfastness that are purer and stricter than those we so carefully study in our schools. How many of them do I see routinely ignoring poverty? How many desiring death or meeting it without panic or distress? That man over there who is digging in my garden—this morning he buried his father or his son. The very names they give to maladies soften them and sweeten their bitter taste. For them any lung disease is ‘a cough’, dysentery ‘a looseness of the bowels’, pleurisy ‘a cold’. And as they give them mild names they endure them better too. Illnesses have to be grievous indeed to interrupt the habitual toil of these folk. They take to their beds only to die: [C] ‘That simple and open virtue has been converted into obscure and subtle knowledge’ [Seneca].

·THE HORRORS OF THE PRESENT TIME·

[B] I was writing this around the time when a huge burden from our civil disturbances settled down for several months with all its weight right on me. I had the enemy at my gates on one side and on the other side a worse enemy, marauders—[C] ‘The fight is not with arms but with crimes’ [Livy]—[B] and I was being tried by every kind of military outrage all at once. ‘To right and left a foe is to be feared; on either side immediate danger threatens’ [Ovid].

[A paragraph exclaiming against the consequences of France’s civil war. This passage is a bit obscure: it says things one naturally takes to concern how *France* is harming

itself, but they are worded in terms of how *the war* harms itself. Montaigne throws in three quotations, one from Catullus: ‘Right and wrong, all shuffled together in this wicked fury, have deprived us of the gods’ protection.’]

At the start of such an epidemic, one can distinguish the healthy from the sick; but when it drags on as ours does, the whole body politic is affected; from the head to the heels no part is free from corruption. For no air is so greedily inhaled, or spreads and penetrates so much, as the air of licence. Our armies are bound and held together now only by foreign cement; one can no longer make up a reliable and disciplined army out of Frenchmen alone. How shameful! There is only as much discipline as hired soldiers show us; as for ourselves, we follow our own lead—each making his own choice—rather than being led by our commander, who has more trouble with his own troops than with any enemy. Everyone is free and dissolute—except for the commander, who must follow, court and bend; he alone has to obey.

It pleases me to see how much baseness and faint-heartedness there is in ambition, and how much abjection and servility it requires to achieve its goal. But it displeases me to see—as I do all the time—decent natures that are capable of justice growing corrupt in their management and command of this disorder. Long tolerance begets habit; habit, acceptance and imitation. We had enough ill-born souls without spoiling the good and generous ones. If we go on this way hardly anyone will be left to whom to entrust the health of this state, should fortune restore it to health. . . .

[C] What has become of the ancient precept that soldiers have more to fear from their commander than from their enemy? And of the wonderful example of an apple tree that happened to be enclosed within the limits of a Roman army camp, and was still there when the camp was struck the next day, leaving its owner with his full complement of ripe and

delicious apples? I wish that our young men, instead of the time they spend on less useful travels and less honourable apprenticeships, would devote half of it to watching the war at sea under some good Captain-Commander of Rhodes, and half to observing the discipline of the Turkish armies, for it has many advantages over ours. One is this: *our* soldiers become more disorderly during campaigns, *theirs* more restrained and timid; because offences or thefts against the common people that are punishable by the bastinado in times of peace become capital in time of war. There is a pre-established tariff:

- for one egg taken without payment, fifty strokes of the cane;
- for anything else (no matter how trivial) that cannot be used as food, immediate impaling or beheading.

It amazed me to read in the history of Selim, the cruellest conqueror there has ever been, that when he subjugated Egypt, the wonderful gardens surrounding the city of Damascus and abounding in delicacies remained unsullied by the hands of his soldiers. Yet those gardens were all open and unfenced.

[B] But is there any illness in a government affliction that it is worth tackling with such a fatal medicine ·as civil war·? According to Favonius, not even the tyrannical usurpation of a state. Similarly, Plato does not allow that violence be done against the peace of one's country even to cure it, and accepts no correction that costs the blood and ruin of the citizens, ruling that it is a good man's duty in that case to leave things alone, simply praying to God to bring his supernatural hand to bear. . . . I was a Platonist in that way before I knew there was a Plato in the world. And if

this personage [Plato] must be completely excluded from our communion—

he who by the purity of his conscience had enough merit with the divine favour to penetrate so deeply into the light of Christianity through the general darkness of the world of his time

—I do not think it well becomes us to let ourselves be taught by a pagan. How impious it is to expect help from God that is his alone with no cooperation on our part! [[The opening part of this sentence must be meant semi-sarcastically, as is shown by the indented part that follows it.]]. . . .

[Then a page expressing, in vivid—almost rapturous—detail, Montaigne's hatred and contempt for people who think they can improve the state by doing wicked things. He stresses the harm that the civil war is doing to the common people, present and future. He quotes Livy: 'Nothing is more deceitful than a depraved piety by which the will of the gods serves as a pretext for crimes.']

·MONTAIGNE'S TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS·

In addition to that attack,¹ I suffered others. I incurred the penalties that moderation brings during such ·civil· disorders. I was thumped by everyone: to the Ghibelline I was a Guelph, to the Guelph a Ghibelline. (One of my poets says just that, but I do not remember where.) The location of my home, coupled with the experience ·of me· that the men of my neighbourhood had, presented me in one aspect, my life and actions in another.² There were no formal accusations, for there was nothing they could get their teeth into. I never break the laws; and if anyone had proceeded against me, he would have come out of it worse than I would.

¹ [This presumably refers to the troubled time mentioned on page 145.]

² Montaigne lived in a region dominated by the Reformed Church; he was an active Roman Catholic who never hid his allegiance. [Note by Screech.]

There were unspoken suspicions circulating underhand, for which there is never a lack of pretext in so confused a chaos, any more than there is a lack of envious minds or silly ones.

[C] I usually help any harmful presumptions that fortune strews against me by the way I have always had of avoiding justifying, excusing and explaining myself, reckoning that to plead for my good conscience is to compromise it. As Cicero wrote: on a point that is self-evident and admitted by everyone, 'argument would only diminish its clearness'. And—as if each man saw into me as clearly as I do—instead of retreating from an accusation I advance towards it and enhance it by an ironic and mocking admission of guilt; unless I flatly keep silent about it as something unworthy of a reply.

a Those who take this for an over-haughty confidence are hardly less hostile to me than **b** those who take it for the weakness of an indefensible case; especially **a** great lords for whom lack of submissiveness to them is the ultimate offence, and who are harsh towards any righteousness that is recognised and felt not to be abject, humble and suppliant. I have often bumped up against that pillar!

Be that as it may, over what happened to me then [see footnote 1 on this page] [B] an ambitious man would have hanged himself; so would an avaricious man. I am not interested in acquisition—'Let me keep what I have now, or even less, so that I may live for myself whatever remaining life the gods grant me' [Horace]—but losses that I suffer through others' wrong-doing, whether by theft or violence, pain me about as much as they would a man who is sick and tormented by avarice. The affront is immeasurably more bitter than the loss.

A thousand different kinds of trouble assailed me, one after another; if they had come together I would have borne them more cheerfully. I had already thought about whom

among my loved ones I could entrust with a needy and disgraced old age, but after letting my eyes rove over all my affairs, I found myself stripped to my shirt. To let oneself fall plumb down from such a height, it must be into the arms of an affection that is solid, vigorous, and favoured by fortune. There are not many of those, if there are any at all. In the end I realised that the surest way was to entrust myself and my needs to myself, and that if I should chance to be coldly treated by fortune's favour, I should recommend myself even more strongly to my own 'favour', clinging to myself—and looking after myself—all the more closely. [C] In all things men rely on support from others, so as to spare their own resources, which are the only ones that are (for anyone who can arm himself with them) sure and powerful. Each man rushes elsewhere and towards the future, since no man has reached himself.

·WHAT HE LEARNED FROM THEM·

[B] And I concluded that that these were useful troubles.

(i) Firstly, because bad students must be taught by the rod when reason proves inadequate, [C] just as we use fire and hammered-in wedges to straighten wood that has become warped. [B] For such a long time I have been lecturing myself about holding to myself and keeping apart from external things; yet I still go on turning my gaze to one side: I am tempted by a great person's bow, his gracious word or his encouraging face. (God knows there is a scarcity of those nowadays, and how little they mean!) I still hear without frowning the seductions of those who want to draw me into the market-place, defending myself against them so feebly that it looks as though I would really rather succumb to them. Such an unteachable mind requires flogging; I am a cask that is splitting its seams, cracking up, and falling completely to pieces; it needs to be knocked together and its

hoopd tightened up with good whacks from the mallet.

(ii) Secondly, because my misfortune served me as practice to prepare myself for worse—

if I, who through the generosity of fortune and the nature of my *mœurs* hoped to be among the last, came to be among the first to be caught by this storm

—teaching me in good time to limit my way of life and to order it for a new state. True freedom is to be able to do anything with oneself. ^[C] ‘Most powerful is he who has power over himself.’ [Seneca] ^[B] In an ordinary tranquil time one prepares oneself for moderate and common ills; but during the disorders we have lived through these last thirty years, every man in France. . . . sees himself at every moment on the verge of having his fortune entirely upended. All the more reason to keep one’s courage supplied with stronger and more vigorous provisions. Let us be grateful to our fate for having made us live at a time that is not soft, languid and idle; a man who would not otherwise have become famous may do so because of his misfortunes.

^[C] I seldom read in history books about such commotions in other states without regretting that I could not have been present to study them more closely; so too my curiosity leads me to find at least some satisfaction in seeing with my own eyes this remarkable spectacle of our public death, its symptoms and its form. Since I cannot hold it back, I am happy to be destined to be present and to learn from it. After all, we eagerly seek to witness the tragic ups and downs of human fortune as portrayed fictionally on the stage. It’s not that we lack compassion over what we hear ·there·, but the exceptional nature of those pathetic events arouses in us a pain that gives us pleasure. Nothing tickles that does not pinch. And good historians avoid peaceful narratives—as though they were stagnant water and dead sea ·with no wind to fill the sails·—in order to get back to the seditions and

wars to which they know we summon them.

I doubt if I can decently admit how little it has cost me in terms of the repose and tranquillity of my life to have passed more than a half of it during the collapse of my country. I purchase a little too cheaply the patience with which I confront misfortunes that do not affect me personally; and before complaining on my own behalf, I consider not so much what has been taken from me as what inner and outer goods I still keep safe. There is some consolation in dodging, one after another, the successive evils that have us in their sights, only to strike elsewhere around us. Moreover, where public misfortunes are concerned, the more widely my compassion is spread the weaker it becomes. To which add •that it is certainly more or less true that ‘from public ills we feel only as much as touches us directly’ [Livy], and •that our original health was such as to diminish any sorrow we ought to have felt for its loss—it was ‘health’, but only by comparison with the sickness that followed it. We did not have far to fall.

Least tolerable, it seems to me, are the corruption and brigandry that enjoy dignity and established status. . . . There was a universal conjunction of organs rivalling one another in corruption, and most of them afflicted with age-old ulcers which no longer admitted of cure or asked for it.

^[B] This collapse stimulated rather than crushed me, thanks to my conscience which bore itself not merely peaceably but proudly, and found nothing to reproach me with. And since God never sends men unmixed evils any more than unmixed blessings, my health held out better than usual throughout this period; and just as without health I can do nothing, with health there are few things I cannot do. Health gave me the means to arouse all my resources and to put out my hand to ward off the blow that would ·otherwise· have wounded more deeply. And I found •that with my endurance I had some foothold against Fortune, and •that it would take

some great shock to throw me from the saddle.

I do not say this to provoke Fortune into making a more vigorous attack on me. I am her servant; my hands are raised to her; let her be satisfied, for God's sake! Do I feel her assaults? Of course I do. Just as those who are overwhelmed and possessed by grief yet allow some pleasure to fondle them from time to time and to release a smile, so too I have enough hold over myself to make my usual state a peaceful one, free from the burden of painful reflections; yet I allow myself occasionally to be ambushed by the stings of those unpleasant thoughts that batter me even while I am arming myself to drive them off or struggle against them.

·PLAGUE·

Following hard upon the other calamities, a worse one befell me: both inside my home and around it I was accosted by a uniquely virulent plague. Just as healthy bodies fall prey only to the most serious of illnesses, because those are the only ones that can get a hold on them, similarly •the very salubrious air around my estates—which in human memory had never given a foothold to contagion, even when contagion was in the neighbourhood—once •it was corrupted produced strange effects indeed.

I had an absurd situation to put up with: the sight of my house was terrifying to me. Everything inside lay unprotected, abandoned to anyone who wanted it. I, who am so hospitable, had a lot of trouble finding a refuge for my household—a group of castaways, a source of fear to its friends and to itself, and of terror wherever it sought to settle, having to change quarters as soon as one of the group started to feel pain in the tip of a finger. ·At such a time· all •illnesses are taken to be the plague: people don't allow themselves time to diagnose •them. And to top it off: according to the rules of the ·medical· art, after any approach

to danger you have to spend forty days in extreme anxiety about that illness, while your imagination has its own way of agitating you, making even your health sweat with fever.

All this would have affected me much less if I hadn't had to •feel for the sufferings of others and •spend six wretched months as guide for that caravan; for I carry within me my own preservatives, namely resolution and patience. The prospect of being *taken*—which is particularly feared in this illness—does not oppress me much; and if I had been alone and had sought this, it would have been a more cheerful and more remote escape. It is a death that doesn't strike me as one of the worst: it is normally short, marked by numbness and lack of pain, consoled by the public situation, without ceremony, without mourning, without a crowd around.

As for those who lived in our neighbourhood, not one in a hundred escaped: 'You can see the abandoned realms of the shepherds and, far and wide, the deserted pastures' [Virgil]. Here my income is mainly from labour; land that once had a hundred men working on it has long lain idle.

·MORAL BENEFITS OF THE PLAGUE·

At that time what examples of resoluteness did we not see in the simplicity of all those folk? Each one—*each* one—gave up worrying about his life. The grapes, the principal produce of the region, remained hanging on the vines, since everybody was calmly awaiting death, that night or the next morning, with voices and faces so little terrified that it seemed they had made a pact with that unavoidable evil, and that the sentence upon them was universal and inevitable. That sentence always is! Yet our resoluteness in the face of death hangs on so little! Its being delayed by a few hours, or the mere consideration of having company, make us conceive of death differently. But just look at these ·simple· folk! They are no longer stunned, no longer weep for one another, over

the fact that they all—children, young people, old people—are to die in the same month. I saw some who were afraid of being left behind, as though in some dreadful wilderness; their only worry seemed to be about their burial; it upset them to see corpses scattered over the fields at the mercy of the beasts that promptly swarmed in there.

([C] How divergent human notions are! The Neorites, a nation subjugated by Alexander, abandon the bodies of their dead deep in their forests, there to be eaten—for them this is the only satisfactory form of sepulture.)

[B] One man, in good health, was already digging his grave; others lay down in theirs while still alive. And one of my labourers used his hands and feet to pull soil over himself as he lay dying; wasn't he sheltering himself so as to go to sleep more comfortably? . . .

In short, a whole nation was, at a stroke and **a** as a matter of usage, put on a footing that was as firm of purpose as any **b** studied and premeditated steadfastness.¹ Most of the instructions that learning uses to encourage us are more showy than powerful, and more ornamental than effective. We have abandoned nature and want to make it our pupil—nature that used to guide us so happily and surely. Yet some traces of its teaching and a little of its image remain—thanks to ignorance!—imprinted on the life of that crowd of uncultured country-folk; and erudition is compelled every day to go and borrow this from them, in order to supply models of constancy, innocence and tranquillity for its own pupils. It is fine to see **•**that those pupils, full of so much beautiful knowledge, have to imitate that stupid simplicity, imitating it indeed in the most basic acts of virtue; **•**that

our wisdom must learn from the very beasts the lessons most useful for the greatest and most necessary parts of our life—how we should live and die, manage our goods, love and educate our offspring, and maintain justice. . . .; and **•**that our reason (which we manipulate as we will, always finding some variety and novelty) leaves in us no apparent trace of nature.

Men have done with nature what perfumiers do with oil: they have adulterated it with so many arguments and far-fetched reasonings that it has become varied, different for each man, and has lost its own constant and universal countenance, so that we have to go to the beasts for testimony about it, testimony that is not subject to bias, corruption or diversity of opinion. For while it is indeed true that even they don't always exactly follow nature's road, they stray so little from it that you can always see nature's rut, like the rut left in a mud road by a wagon wheel. It is just the same **•**with horses: when they are led by hand they leap and prance about but not beyond the length of their halters, meanwhile always following the steps of the man who is leading them; and **•**with the hawk that takes to flight but always under the control of its tether.

•LOOKING FORWARD TO ONE'S DEATH•

[C] 'Meditate on banishments, torments, wars, diseases, shipwrecks, so as not to be a novice in any misfortune' [Seneca].

[B] What is the use to us of that curious desire to anticipate all the ills of human nature, laboriously preparing ourselves to encounter even those that may perhaps never touch us?

[C] 'The possibility of suffering makes one as unhappy as the suffering' [Seneca]. We are struck not only by the blow but by

¹ [Montaigne is saying here that anyone who had engaged in **b** philosophical preparation for acting well would not be more firmly resolute than the 'whole nation' was in acting well by **a** just getting on with it.]

the wind and the noise of it! ^[B] Or why go right now, like the most feverish (for it certainly is a fever), and have yourself whipped because it *may* happen that fortune will have you whipped some day?. . . . ‘Throw yourself into experiencing •such ills as may befall you, especially the more extreme ones; test yourself against them,’ men say, ‘make absolutely certain.’ On the contrary, the easiest and most natural thing would be to keep •them right out of one’s thoughts. They won’t come soon enough (•these men seem to think•), their actual reality doesn’t last long enough for us, so our mind should •extend and prolong them, •incorporate them into itself and •dwell on them beforehand—as though they did not weigh sufficiently upon our senses. ^[C] ‘They will weigh heavily enough once they are real,’ says one of the masters, not of some tender sect but of the hardest. ‘Meanwhile favour yourself; believe what you like best. What good does it do you to welcome and anticipate your ill fortune, losing the present because of fear of the future, and being miserable now because you must be so eventually?’ [Seneca] Those are his words.

^[B] [This little paragraph is presumably said sarcastically.] Learning certainly does us a good service by instructing us very precisely about the dimensions of all evils, ‘Whetting with cares the minds of mortal men’ [Virgil]. It would be a shame if a little of their size escaped our sensations and our knowledge!

It is certain that for most people preparations for death have caused more torment than undergoing it. ^[C] It was once said truly, by a most judicious author, ‘Our senses are less affected by **a** suffering than by **b** the thought of it’ [Quintilian]. [The Latin is *Minus afficit sensus a fatigatio quam b cogitatio*. There is no way of reproducing the rhyme in English.]

The feeling that death is **present** is sometimes enough to stir us to a quick resolve to give up seeking to avoid the inevitable. Many gladiators in former times were seen, after

fighting in a cowardly fashion, to accept death most courageously, offering their throats to their opponents’ swords and welcoming them; but contemplating a **future** death requires courage that is steady, and therefore difficult to come by.

^[B] If you don’t know how to die, never mind! Nature will tell you how to do it on the spot, fully and adequately. It will do this job perfectly for you; don’t worry about it: ‘In vain, O mortals, do you seek to know the uncertain hour of your death and what road it will come by’ [Propertius]; ‘It is less painful to undergo sudden and sure destruction than long to anticipate what you fear the most’ [Maximianus].

•OBSESSIVE WORRIES ABOUT DEATH•

We disturb life with worries about death, and death with worries about life. ^[C] One annoys us, the other terrifies us. ^[B] It is not *death* that we are preparing to meet; that is too momentary a matter. ^[C] A quarter of an hour of feeling, without after-effects and *sans nuisance* [here = ‘with nothing specially unpleasant about it’], does not deserve any precepts of its own. ^[B] The fact is that we prepare ourselves against our preparations for death! Philosophy

•commands us to have death ever before our eyes, to foresee it and think about it beforehand,

and then it

•gives us rules and precautions to secure us from being harmed by this foresight and this thought.

That is what those doctors do who make us ill so as to have something on which to employ their drugs and their skill.

^[C] If we have not known how to live, it is wrong to teach us how to die and make the end incongruous with the whole. If we *have* known how to live steadfastly and calmly, we shall know how to die in the same way.

They may boast about it all they please. ‘The entire life of philosophers is a meditation on death’ [Cicero]. But my

opinion is that death is indeed the ending [*bout*], not however the goal [*but*], of life; it is its finish, its extremity, not however its object [meaning 'not what it is *about*]. Life ought to be its own aim and design. Its rightful study is to regulate, conduct, and put up with *itself*. Among the many duties included under the general and principal heading *How to live* there is the sub-section *How to die*; and one of the lightest, ·or would be· if our fears did not give it weight.

[B] Judging by usefulness and naïve truth, the teachings of •simplicity are not much inferior to the contrary ones preached to us by •learning. Men differ in taste and ability; they must be led to what is good for them, each according to his own nature and by different routes: 'Wherever the tempest drives me, there I am carried as a guest' [Horace].

[B] I never saw a peasant in my neighbourhood embark on thoughts about what countenance and steadfastness he would show in his final hour. Nature teaches him not to think about death until he is dying. Then he does it with better grace than Aristotle, who is doubly oppressed by death: by death itself and by his long anticipation. That is why Caesar held that the happiest and least oppressive death was the one least thought about in advance. 'He who suffers before he needs to suffers more than he needs to' [Seneca].

... [C] We are always tripping ourselves up in this way, trying to anticipate and overrule nature's prescriptions. It is only for the learned, when they are quite well, to dine less well because of the thought of death, glowering at it. Common folk need no remedy or consolation except when the blow falls; and then they consider precisely as much as they feel, that much and no more. [B] Isn't this what we say, that what gives common folk their power to endure present ills, as well as their profound indifference towards inauspicious future events, is their insensitivity and lack of understanding? [C] and that their souls are less open to

penetration and disturbance because they are thick and obtuse. [B] If that is how things stand, then for God's sake let us from now on adhere to the school of animal stupidity! It leads its pupils gently to the ultimate profit promised by learning. We shall have no lack of good teachers, interpreters of natural simplicity.

·THE EXAMPLE OF SOCRATES·

Socrates will be one. For, as far as I can remember, he says something like the following to the judges who are deliberating about his life.

·START OF SOCRATES' SPEECH· I am afraid, sirs, that if I ask you not to put me to death I shall impale myself on the charge of my accusers, namely that I claim to be wiser than everyone else because I have some more hidden knowledge of things above us and of things below us. I know that I have had no association or acquaintance with death, or known anyone who has experienced what it is like and can inform me about it. Those who fear death presuppose that they know it. As for me, I do not know what death is or how things go in the other world. Perhaps death is something indifferent, perhaps desirable.

[C] (However, if it is •a migration from one place to another, it's likely that there is some improvement in going to live among so many great men who have passed on, and to be free from having any more to do with unjust and corrupt judges. If ·on the other hand· it is •an annihilation of our being, it is still an improvement to enter upon a long and peaceful night. We know of nothing in life sweeter than quiet rest and deep dreamless sleep.)

[B] Things that I know to be bad—such as harming one's neighbour or disobeying one's superior (whether God or man)—I scrupulously avoid. I cannot go in fear of things when I do not know whether they are good or bad.

[C] If I go off to my death and leave you here alive, the gods alone know with whom it will go better, you or me. So, as far as it concerns me, you will decide as you please. But following my way of giving just and useful counsel, I do say that unless you see more deeply into my case than I do, for the sake of your conscience you will do better to set me free; and if you make your judgement in accordance with

- my past deeds, public and private,
- my intentions,
- the profit that so many of our citizens, young and old, daily derive from my conversation, and
- the profit I bring to all of you,

you cannot properly discharge your obligation to my merit except by ordering that I be maintained in the Prytaneum—at public expense, given my poverty—something I have often seen you grant, with less reason, to others.

Do not take it as stubbornness or disdain if I do not follow precedent and approach you begging and moving you to pity. . . . I have friends and relatives who can appear before you in tears and mourning, and I have three weeping children to move you to pity. But I would bring shame on our city if, at my age and with the reputation for wisdom that I am now charged with, I were to stoop to such cowardly behaviour. What would people say about the other Athenians? I have always told those who listened to me not to redeem their life by a dishonourable action. And in my country's wars—at Amphipolis, at Potidaea, at Delium, and others I have been in—I showed in practice how far I was from securing my safety by doing something shameful.

Moreover, I would be compromising your sense of duty and soliciting you to do something ugly; for you should not be persuaded by my pleas, but by pure and solid reasons of justice. You have sworn to the gods to abide by the law; ·if I begged you to acquit me· it would seem that I wanted to bring

you under suspicion and accuse you of not believing that there are any gods! And I would be testifying against myself that I also did not believe in them as I should, distrusting their governance and not committing my case entirely to their hands. I have complete trust in them; I am convinced that they will act in this matter as will be best for me and for you. Good men, living or dead, have nothing to fear from the gods. ·END OF SOCRATES' SPEECH TO HIS JUDGES·

Is that not a sober, sane plea, as well as being

- natural and lowly,
- unimaginably sublime, and
- incomparably truthful and open?

and made in such an hour of need! [C] He was right to prefer it to the plea that great orator Lysias had written out for him, excellently couched in lawyers' language but unworthy of so noble an accused. Should one hear a supplicating voice from the mouth of Socrates? Should that proud virtue strike sail at the height of its display? Should his rich and powerful nature have entrusted his defence to *art*, and in his highest test have renounced truth and simplicity (the ornaments of his speech) in order to deck itself out with the cosmetic figures and fictions of a memorised address?

He acted most wisely, and like himself, in not corrupting the tenor of an incorruptible life and such a saintly model of human nature in order to add a year to his old age and betray the immortal memory of that glorious end. His owed

- his life not to himself but to be an example to the world. Would it not have been a public public loss if he had ended
- it in some idle obscure manner?

[B] Indeed such a detached and quiet way of considering his death deserved that posterity should consider it all the more on his behalf; which it did. In the whole of justice nothing is more just than what fortune ordained for his glory. The Athenians held those who were responsible for

his death in such abomination that they shunned them like excommunicated persons; everything they touched was held to be polluted; no-one would wash with them at the public baths; no-one greeted them or owned to acquaintance with them; so that finally, no longer able to bear such public hatred, they hanged themselves.

·THE NATURAL ATTITUDE TO DEATH·

If anyone thinks that •among so many examples of Socrates' sayings that would have served my purpose I did badly in choosing this one, and •that Socrates' reasoning here is far above the opinion of common men—well, I chose it on purpose. For I judge otherwise and hold that his reasoning here. . . . in an unstudied and childlike boldness, exhibits nature's pure and primary stamp and simplicity. For it is credible that we naturally fear pain but not •that we naturally fear dying as such; it is as essential a part of our being as living is. For what purpose would Nature have given us a hatred and horror of death, seeing that •she gives it the status of something extremely useful in maintaining the succession and substitution within her works, and that •within this universal republic it is more conducive to birth and increase than to loss and destruction. 'Thus is the universe renewed' [Lucretius]. [C] One death gives rise to a thousand lives' [Ovid]. [B] The failing of one life is the gateway to a thousand other lives.

[C] Nature has imprinted on the beasts a concern for themselves and their own conservation. They go so far as to be afraid of being injured, of knocks and wounds, of our tying them up and beating them—these being events that are within the scope of their sense and experience. But they cannot fear our killing them; they don't have the capacity to imagine death or to think about it. . . .

·MONTAIGNE'S BORROWINGS·

Besides, isn't the style of argument that Socrates uses here equally admirable for its simplicity and its vigour? Truly, it is much easier to talk like Aristotle and live like Caesar than to talk and live like Socrates. In him is lodged the highest degree of perfection and of difficulty; it can't be achieved by mere *skill*.

Our own faculties are not trained in that way. We do not exercise them or recognise them; we give great weight to those of others and allow our own to lie unused. For example, someone could say of me that here I have merely gathered a bunch of other men's flowers, offering nothing of my own but the string to tie them. I have indeed bowed to the taste of the public with these borrowed ornaments that accompany me. But I do not intend them to cover me up or to hide me; that is the opposite of my design. I want to display nothing but my own, what is mine by nature. And if I had taken my own advice I would have spoken absolutely alone, come what may. [C] I load myself with them—these borrowings—more and more heavily every day, beyond my projected design and the way I started, following the fancy of the age and the urging of others. If that is unbecoming to me, as I think it is, never mind: it may be useful to somebody else.

[B] There are men who quote Plato and Homer without ever looking at them. I too have taken plenty of passages not from the originals but from elsewhere. Since in the place where I write I am surrounded by a thousand volumes, I could (if I wanted to) borrow without trouble or competence, from a dozen of the botchers whose pages I hardly ever turn, quite enough to put an enamel gloss on this treatise about physiognomy. To cram myself with quotations all I need is the preliminary epistle of some German! That is how we go seeking tidbits of glory to deceive this foolish world!

[C] Those concoctions of commonplaces by which so many people eke out their studies are almost useless except for commonplace topics; they serve to show us off, not to guide us—a ridiculous fruit of learning which serves as rough amusement for Socrates against Euthydemus. I have known books made out of materials that have never been studied or understood, the author entrusting to various learned friends the research for this and that material for constructing the work, contenting himself for his part with having planned the project and piled up by his industry that bundle of unfamiliar materials. At least the ink and paper are his! Honestly, that is buying or borrowing a book, not writing one. Someone who does this shows men not that he can make a book but (in case they were wondering) that he cannot make one. [B] A magistrate boasted in my presence that he had crammed about two hundred quotations from others into a single decision he had written as a presiding judge. . . . [B] A petty and absurd boast, in my opinion, for such a subject and such a person.

[C] Among my many borrowings I enjoy being able to conceal some of them, disguising them and reshaping them to serve a new purpose. At the risk of letting it be said that this shows my failure to understand their natural use, I give them a particular application with my own hand, so that they may to that extent be less purely someone else's. [B] Those others put their thefts on parade and into their accounts, thereby acquiring a better claim in law than I do! [C] We naturalists reckon that the honour of discovery is greatly, incomparably, preferable to the honour of quotation.

[B] If I had wanted to speak from knowledge, I would have spoken sooner; I would have written at a time closer to my studies, when I had more intellect and memory, and would have trusted myself to the vigour of that age more than I do now, if I had wanted to make a trade out of writing. . . .

[B] Two of my acquaintances, men of great scholarship, have in my opinion lost half their value by declining to publish at 40 and waiting until they were 60.

Like youth, maturity has its defects—worse ones. And old age is as unsuited to work of that scholarly nature as to any other. Anyone who puts his decrepitude into print is mad if he hopes to squeeze out of it any humours that don't stink of a man who is out of favour, wandering in his thoughts, and half-asleep. As our mind ages, becomes constipated and thick. I reveal my ignorance with copious pomp; I reveal my learning meagrely and pitifully—[C] the latter as an accessory, a by-product, the former as explicit and primary. Strictly, I treat nothing except *nothing*, and I treat no branch of knowledge except that of lack of knowledge [*ny d'aucune science que de celle de l'inscience*]. [B] I have selected the time when my life (which I am to portray) is all laid out before me; whatever remains has more to do with death. I would willingly give the public on my way out an account of my death, if I found it to be loquacious as others do.

·BEAUTY·

It vexes me that Socrates, who was the perfect exemplar of all the great qualities, should have chanced to have (as they say he did) a body and face that were so ugly and incongruous with the beauty of his soul [C] —he who was so madly in love with beauty. Nature did him an injustice. [B] There is nothing more probable than the conformity and correspondence of the body and the mind. [C] 'It matters much to souls what sort of body they are lodged in; for the body has many qualities that sharpen the mind, and many that blunt it' [Cicero]. The author here is talking about unnatural ugliness and deformity of limbs. But we also use 'ugliness' to refer to an immediately recognizable unattractiveness that resides chiefly in the face and often arouses our distaste

for quite trivial causes: for its colouring, a spot, a coarse expression or for some inexplicable reason even when the limbs are well-proportioned and whole.

In that category was the ugliness that clothed the very beautiful soul of La Boétie. Such surface ugliness, imperious though it may be, is less harmful in its effects on a man's mind and of little certainty in people's opinion. The other kind—'deformity' properly so-called—is more substantial and more inclined to turn its effects inwards. The shape of the foot is not revealed by every shoe of fine polished leather but it is by every close-fitting shoe. ^[B] As Socrates said of his own ugliness, it would have revealed his soul as ugly if he hadn't corrected it by training. ^[C] But in saying this I hold that he was joking as usual; never did so excellent a soul make itself.

^[B] I cannot say often enough how highly I rate beauty, a powerful and beneficial quality. Socrates called it a 'brief tyranny', and Plato 'nature's privilege'. We have no quality that surpasses it in repute. It holds the first place in human relations; it presents itself in the forefront, and seduces and preposses our judgement with great authority and wondrous impact. ^[C] Phryne would have lost her case even in the hands of an excellent attorney if she had not in opening her robe corrupted her judges by the brilliance of her beauty. And I find that Cyrus, Alexander and Caesar, those three masters of the world, did not forget beauty in carrying out their great affairs; nor did the older Scipio. . . .

Aristotle says that the right to command belongs to the beautiful, and that when there are any whose beauty approaches that of the portraits of the gods, veneration is due to them too. When someone asked him why men keep company with beautiful people longer and more often, he replied: 'Only a blind man should ask that.' Most philosophers, and the greatest, paid for their tuition and acquired wisdom by the

favour and agency of their beauty.

^[B] Not only in the men who serve me, but also in the animals, I consider beauty to be within two fingers' distance from goodness. Yet to me it seems that those facial traits and features—and those lineaments from which inner dispositions are inferred as well as our future fortunes—are things that do not fall very simply and directly under the headings of beauty or ugliness. Any more than in time of plague every pleasant smell and clear air promises health, or every closeness and stench promises infection.

Those who accuse women of contradicting their beauty by their *mœurs* do not always hit the mark. A face that is not very well-shaped may yet have an air of probity and dependability; just as, on the contrary, I have read between a pair of beautiful eyes threats of a malicious and dangerous nature. There are favourable physiognomies; in a crowd of victorious enemies you will immediately choose, from among men unknown, one rather than another to surrender to and to entrust with your life; and beauty has no part in the choice.

Looks are a weak guarantee, yet they have some influence. If my task were to whip the wicked, I would do so more severely to those who belie and betray the promises nature had planted on their features; I would punish more harshly malice in a man who had a kindly appearance. It seems that some faces are lucky, others unlucky. And I think some skill is needed to distinguish

- the kindly face from the simple one,
- the severe from the unpolished,
- the malicious from the upset and humiliated,
- the disdainful from the sad,

and other such pairs of neighbouring qualities. There are beauties that are not merely proud but haughty; there are others that are gentle; and further along the line others that

are insipid. As for forecasting the future from them, such matters I leave undecided.

As I have said already, I have simply and crudely adopted this ancient precept:

We cannot go wrong by following nature; the sovereign precept is to conform to it.

Unlike Socrates, I have not corrected my natural disposition by the power of reason, and I have not made the slightest use of artifice to trouble my inclinations. I let myself go as I came: I combat nothing; my two ruling parts of their own accord live together in peace and harmony; but my nurse's milk, thank God, was moderately healthful and temperate.

^[C] Shall I say this in passing? There is a certain idea of scholastic morality—virtually the only one current—that is held in higher esteem among us than it is worth; it is a slave to precepts and bound by hopes and fears. I like the morality that laws and religions do not •make but •perfect and •authorise, that feels it has the means of sustaining itself without help, that is born in us from its own stock, through the seed of universal reason stamped upon every man who is not disnatured. This reason that corrects Socrates' inclination to behave badly makes him •obedient to the men and the gods who command in his city and •courageous in death not because his soul is immortal but because he is mortal. Any teaching which convinces people that religious belief alone, without morality, suffices to satisfy God's justice is destructive of all government and is far more harmful than it is ingenious and subtle. Human conduct reveals an enormous gap between devoutness and conscience.

·MONTAIGNE'S ADVANTAGES FROM HIS 'BEARING'·

^[B] I have—well, anyway I *had*—a bearing •that is favourable, both in itself and in what others make of it, and •that has an appearance contrary to that of Socrates. It has

often happened that on the mere credit of my presence and manner, people who have had no previous acquaintance with me have put great trust in me, whether for their own affairs or for mine. And in foreign countries I have received singular and rare favour because of it. But the following two experiences are perhaps worth narrating in detail.

[I] A certain person planned to take me and my house by surprise. His scheme was to come alone to my gate and press fairly insistently to be admitted. I knew him by name and had reason to trust him as a neighbour and a distant relative. ^[C] I ordered the gate to be opened for him, as I do for everyone. ^[B] There he was, looking quite terrified, with his horse winded and quite exhausted. He told me the following tale:

He had just encountered an enemy of his half a league away. (I knew that man too, and had heard of their feud.) This enemy had followed remarkably close on his heels. He, having been surprised in disarray and weaker in numbers, had rushed to my gate for safety. He was greatly troubled about his men, whom he supposed were dead or taken.

I tried quite naively to comfort, reassure and refresh him. Soon after, up came four or five of his soldiers, looking equally frightened and wanting to be let in. More came, then still more, until there were 25 or 30 of them, all armed and well-equipped and pretending to have their enemy at their heels.

^[C] This mystery-play began to awaken my suspicions. ^[B] I was not unaware of what sort of time I was living in, or of how much my house might be coveted; and I knew of several cases where acquaintances of mine had had similar bad experiences. Nevertheless, I considered that nothing would be gained by starting in a pleasant way if I did not go through with it; so, not being able to get rid of them without

smashing everything, I allowed myself to take the simplest and most natural course (as I always do) and gave orders for them to be admitted.

·An aside·: Besides, the fact is that by my nature I am not very suspicious or distrustful; I am apt to lean towards the kindest excuse and interpretation; I take men according to the common order, and do not believe in the perverted and unnatural inclinations—any more than in portents and miracles—unless I am forced to do so by some major piece of evidence. Furthermore, I am a man who readily commits myself to •fortune, and throws myself headlong into •her arms. Up to now I have had more reason to congratulate myself on this attitude than to pity myself, and I have found fortune to be both better informed ^[C] and better disposed towards my affairs ^[B] than I am. There have been a few deeds in my life the handling of which could rightly be called difficult or, if you wish, prudent. Allow even a third of those ·successful outcomes· to be due to me; certainly two-thirds were abundantly due to fortune. ^[C]We go wrong, it seems to me, in not trusting ourselves enough to Heaven and in claiming more from our own conduct of affairs than rightly belongs to us. That is why our schemes so often go awry. Heaven is jealous of the scope we allow to the rights of human wisdom, to the prejudice of its own; and the more we extend them, the more it cuts them back.

^[B] ·Returning to the narrative·: Those armed men remained mounted in my courtyard; their leader, who was with me in my hall, had not wanted his horse to be stabled, saying that he had to withdraw as soon as he had news of his men. He saw he was master of the situation, and that the moment had come to carry out his plan. Subsequently he often told me—for he was not afraid to tell this tale—that what snatched his treachery from his grasp were my face and my frankness. He got back into the saddle; his men,

watching to see what signal he would give them, were amazed to see him ride out and surrender his advantage.

[II] On another occasion, trusting to some truce or other that had just been proclaimed between our forces, I set out on a journey through particularly ticklish territory. As soon as wind of me got about, three or four groups of horsemen set out from different places to catch me. One of them made contact with me on the third day, when I was charged by fifteen or twenty masked gentlemen followed by a wave of mounted archers. There I was, captured; having surrendered, I was dragged off into the thick of a nearby forest, deprived of my horse and luggage, my coffers ransacked, my money box taken, horses and equipment divided among new owners. We haggled for a long time in that thicket over my ransom, which they pitched so high that it was obvious that they knew little about me. They started a big dispute over my life. Indeed there were many threatening circumstances that showed the danger I was in: ^[C]‘Now you need all your courage, Aeneas, now a steadfast heart’ [Virgil].

^[B] I kept standing on my rights under the truce: to let them have only what they had gained by despoiling me (not a trivial amount), with no promise of further ransom. We were there for two or three hours when they •set me on a horse that was unlikely to bolt away, •committed me individually to be brought along under the guard of fifteen or twenty harquebusiers, and •dispersed my men among other such soldiers, with orders to escort us as prisoners along different routes. I had already been taken the distance of some two or three harquebus shots. . . . when a sudden and very unexpected change came over them. I saw their leader ride over to me, using most gentle words and taking pains to search among his troops for my scattered belongings, which he returned to me so far as he could find them, even including my money box. The best gift they gave me was my

freedom; the rest did not concern me much ^[C] at that time.

^[B] I truly do not really know even now what the true cause was of such a novel about-face and change of mind with nothing apparently driving it, of such a miraculous reversal of intent at such a time and in the course of an operation that had been thought through and deliberated upon and that custom had made lawful (for from the outset I openly admitted which side I was on and what road I was taking). The most conspicuous among them, who took off his mask and let me know his name, then told me several times that I owed my liberation to my countenance as well as to the freedom and firmness of my speech, which made me unworthy of such a misfortune; and he asked me to promise to return the compliment ·should the occasion arise·. It is possible that God in his goodness wanted to use such trivial means to preserve me. (He protected me again the following day from other and worse ambushes that these very men had warned me about.)

The man in the second of these incidents is still alive to tell the tale: the man in the first was killed not long ago.

If my face did not vouch for me, if people did not read in my eyes and my voice the innocence of my intentions, I would not have lasted so long without feud and without harm, given my indiscreet freedom in saying, rightly or wrongly, whatever comes into my mind and in judging things rashly. This style may reasonably appear discourteous and ill-suited to our usage; but I have never found anyone who considered it injurious or malicious, or who took offence at my frankness provided he had it from my own mouth. Reported words have a different sense, as they have a different sound.

Besides, I don't hate anyone, and I am so squeamish about hurting people that I cannot do it even to serve a rational end. And when circumstances have required me to pass sentences on criminals, I have preferred to fall short

of justice. ^[C] 'I wish the only crimes committed were those I really had the heart to punish' [Livy]. Aristotle is said to have been reproached for having been too merciful to a wicked man. He replied: 'I have indeed been merciful to the man, but not to the wickedness.'

Ordinary judgements are inflamed towards vengeance out of horror for the crime, which is precisely what cools mine: my horror at the first murder makes me fear a second, and my hatred of the first cruelty makes me hate any imitation of it. . . .

13. Experience

·AGAINST LEGAL MINUTIAE·

^[B] No desire is more natural than the desire for knowledge. We try all the means that can lead us to it. When reason fails us, we make use of experience—^[C] 'By various trials experience created art, example showing the way' [Manlius]—^[B] which is a weaker and less dignified means; but the truth is such a large thing that we should not disdain any method that leads us to it. Reason has so many forms that we don't know which to resort to; experience has no fewer. The inference we want to draw from the likeness between events is uncertain because they all show unlikenesses. When collating things, no quality is as universal as diversity and variety! The Greeks, the Latins and we ourselves use *eggs* as the most explicit example of likeness; yet there was a man in Delphi among others who recognised the signs of difference between eggs and never mistook one for another; ^[C] when there were several hens, he could tell which one an egg came from. ^[B] Dissimilarity intrudes itself, uninvited, into our works; no art can achieve ·perfect· similarity. . . . Likeness does not make things *one* as much as unlikeness

makes them *other*. [C] Nature is obliged to make nothing *other* that is not unlike.

[B] That is why I am not pleased by the opinion of the one who sought to rein in the authority of the judges by multiplying laws, cutting up their meat for them.¹ He didn't realise that there is as much scope and freedom in interpreting laws as in making them.

(And those who think they can diminish and stop our disputes by referring us to the express words of the Bible—they must be joking! Our mind finds the field no less spacious in registering the meaning of others than in presenting its own. As if there were less animus and virulence in commenting than in inventing!)

We see how wrong he was. For we have in France more laws than all the rest of the world together, and more than would be needed to rule all the worlds of Epicurus. [C] 'As formerly we suffered from crimes, so now we suffer from laws' [Tacitus]. [B] Yet we have left so much to the discretion and opinion of our judges that there was never such a licentious and powerful freedom. What have our legislators gained by isolating a hundred thousand categories and particular cases and making a hundred thousand laws apply to them? That number bears no proportion to the infinite diversity of human actions. By multiplying •our imaginary cases we'll never match the diversity of actual ones. Let there be a hundred times as many of •them, it will still never happen that even one future case will so completely match one of the many thousands of cases already isolated and codified that no detail in it will require separate consideration. There is little relation between our actions (which are perpetually

changing) and fixed unchanging laws. The most desirable laws are the rarest, simplest and most general; and I even think it would be better to have no laws at all than to have them in such profusion as we do now.

Nature always gives us happier laws than those we give ourselves. Witness the Golden Age portrayed by the poets, and the conditions of life we see in nations that have no other laws. There's one where they take as the judge in their disputes the first traveller who comes journeying across their mountains; and another where they choose one of their number on market-days and he decides all their suits on the spot.² What danger would there be in having the wisest men decide our cases for us

the rest of the sentence: *selon les occurrences et à l'oeil, sans obligation d'exemple et de consequence?*

literally meaning: according to the details and at sight, without being bound by **a** example or **b** consequence?

what he is probably getting at: looking straight at each case, attending just to its details without being bound by **a** facts about how previous cases have been decided or **b** worries about what precedent they might be setting?

For every foot its proper shoe. When King Ferdinand sent colonists to the Indies, he wisely stipulated that no-one should be included who had studied jurisprudence; he was afraid that lawsuits would *breed* in the new world, law being of its nature a branch of learning subject to faction and altercation; he judged, with Plato, that it is bad for a country to have lawyers and doctors.

Why does our common language, so easy for all other purposes, become obscure and unintelligible in contracts

¹ Tribonian, the 'architect of the Pandects' of Justinian. He 'cut up their meat' by carving up the Roman laws into gobbets. [Notes 1 and 2 by Screech.]

² Given Montaigne's assimilation of Indians to happy primitive tribes in the Golden Age, those nations are doubtless to be sought in the Americas.

and wills? Why is it that a man who expresses himself so clearly in everything else he says or writes cannot find ways of declaring himself in contracts and wills without sinking into contradictions and obscurity? I think it is because the princes of that art—applying themselves with particular attention to selecting solemn words and contriving artificial phrases—have weighed every syllable and examined every sort of combination so intently that they end up entangled and bogged down in an infinitude of grammatical functions and in sub-clauses that are cut so fine that they can no longer fall under any rule or prescription—or any definite interpretation! ^[C] ‘Cut anything into pieces and it becomes a mass of confusion’ [Seneca].

^{B]} Have you seen children trying to divide a mass of quicksilver into a set number of segments? The more they press it and knead it and try to constrain it to their will, the more they provoke the independence of that noble metal; it escapes their skill, and proceeds to scatter and break down into innumerable tiny parts. It’s the same here; for by subdividing those subtle statements they—lawyers—teach men to increase their doubts; they start us off extending and varying our difficulties, they stretch them out and spread them about. By sowing questions and then pruning them back, they make the world produce abundant crops of uncertainties and quarrels, ^[C] just as the soil is made more fertile when it is broken up and deeply dug: ‘It is learning that creates the difficulty’ [Quintilian].

·AGAINST COMMENTARIES·

^[B] We were perplexed by ·reading· Ulpian, and are still perplexed by Bartolo and Baldus. We should have wiped out the traces of that diversity of innumerable opinions, rather than wearing them as decorations and cramming the heads of posterity with them.

I don’t know what to say about this; but experience leads one to feel that so many interpretations dissipate the truth and break it up. Aristotle wrote to be understood: if *he* could not succeed, still less will another man who is less than Aristotle and who is not treating his own ideas as Aristotle was. By diluting the material, we allow it to escape and spill; we turn one subject into a thousand, and by proliferation and subdivision we end up with ·something like· Epicurus’s infinitude of atoms. Never have two men judged alike about the same thing, and it’s impossible to find two opinions that are exactly alike, even opinions of one man at different times. Ordinarily I find matter for doubt in what the gloss has *not* condescended to touch on; like certain horses I know which trip on a level road, I stumble more easily on the flat.

Who would deny that glosses increase doubts and ignorance, given that no book that men toil over in either divinity or the humanities has had its difficulties cleared up by interpretation? The hundredth commentator passes it on to the next one in a thornier and rougher condition than the first commentator had found it in. Do we ever agree among ourselves that ‘This book already has enough glosses; from now on there is no more to be said about it’?

This is best seen in ·legal· quibbling. The force of law is given to countless legal authorities, countless decisions, and just as many interpretations. Yet do we ever find an end to our need to interpret? Do we see any progress, any advance towards tranquility? Do we need fewer lawyers and judges than when law was still in its infancy? On the contrary, we obscure and bury the meaning; we find it only when we are allowed to do so by all those enclosures and palisades.

Men fail to recognise the natural sickness of their mind; it does nothing but ferret and quest, incessantly whirling around, building, and (like our silkworms) becoming entangled in its own works, being suffocated by it. . . . It thinks it

sees from a distance heaven-knows-what appearance of light and imaginary truth; but while it is running towards that its path is strewn with so many difficulties, obstacles and fresh questions that they lead it astray and bewilder it. . . .

[B] It is only individual weakness that makes us satisfied with what has been found by others or by ourselves in this hunt for knowledge; an abler man won't be satisfied with it. . . . There is no end to our inquiries; our end is in the next world. [C] When the mind is satisfied, that is a sign of diminished faculties or weariness. No spirited mind stops within itself; it is always stretching out and exceeding its capacities. It makes sorties that go beyond what it can achieve. If it is not advancing, pressing forward, getting driven into a corner and coming to blows, it is only half-alive; [B] its inquiries are shapeless and without limits; its nourishment consists in [C] wonder, the hunt and [B] uncertainty, as Apollo made clear enough to us by his speaking (as always) equivocally, obscurely and obliquely, not satisfying us but keeping us interested and busy. It is an irregular activity, never-ending and without pattern or target. Its discoveries excite, pursue and produce one another. 'Thus do we see in a flowing stream water rolling endlessly on water, ripple upon ripple, as in its unchanging bed water flees and water pursues, the first water driven by what follows and drawn on by what went before, water eternally driving into water—ever the same stream with its waters ever-changing.' [La Boétie; the original is in French]

It is more of a business to interpret the interpretations than to interpret the texts, and there are more books about books than about any other subject; all we do is gloss one another. [C] Commentaries are swarming everywhere; there's a great shortage of authors.

Is not learning to understand the learned the chief and most celebrated thing that we learn nowadays? Is that not

the common goal and ultimate goal of all studies?

Our opinions are grafted onto one another. The first serves as a stock for the second, the second for the third. So we climb the ladder, step by step. The one who has climbed highest often has more honour than he deserves, since he has only climbed one speck higher on the shoulders of his immediate predecessor.

[B] How often and perhaps stupidly have I extended my book to make it talk about itself! [C] Stupidly, if only because I ought to have remembered what I say about others who do the same: namely that the way they keep looking at their work tells us that their hearts thrill with love for it, and that even those rough disdainful blows they beat it with are only the love-taps of maternal fondness (following Aristotle, for whom praise and dispraise of oneself often spring from the same sort of arrogance). My excuse is that I should have more freedom in this than others, since I am writing *about* myself and my writings, along with my other activities; my theme turns in on *itself*. But I am not sure that everyone will accept this, which is why I may have been stupid about this matter.

[B] I have observed in Germany that Luther has left behind as many discords and disagreements over the uncertainty of his opinions as he ever raised about Holy Scripture—as many *and more*.

Our controversies are verbal ones. I ask what is *nature*, *pleasure*, *circle* or *substitution*. The question is one of words, and is answered in the same way. 'A stone is a body.' But anyone who pressed on—

'And what is a body?' – 'Substance.' – 'And what is substance?' And so on

—would eventually drive his respondent to the last page of his lexicon. We exchange one word for another, often for one less known. I know what *man* is better than I know what

is *animal, mortal or rational*. In order to satisfy one doubt, they give me three; it is a Hydra's head.

Socrates asked Meno what virtue is. 'There is', said Meno, 'the virtue of a man and of a woman, of a magistrate and of a private individual, of a boy and of an old man.' 'Splendid!', cried Socrates. 'We were looking for a single virtue and here is a swarm of them.'

We put one question and are repaid with a hive-full of them. Just as no event and no shape is completely like another, so also no two are completely unlike. ^[C] Nature's ingenious mixture. If our faces were not alike we could not tell man from beast; if they were not unlike we could not tell man from man. ^[B] All things are connected by some similarity; yet every example is lame, and any comparison drawn from experience is feeble and imperfect; nevertheless, comparisons are always held together by some corner. That is how laws serve, being fitted to each of our affairs by means of some twisted, forced and biased interpretation.

·DEFECTS IN LEGAL PRACTICE·

Since the moral laws concerning each person's individual duties are so hard to frame (as we see they are), it's not surprising that the laws governing collections of individuals are even more so. Consider the form of justice that has ruled over us: it is a true witness to human imbecility, so full it is of contradiction and error. Wherever we find undue leniency or severity in our justice—and we find so much of them in it that I doubt whether the mean between them is met with as frequently—they are sickly parts and unsound [*injustes*] organs of the very body and essence of justice.

Some peasants have just rushed in to tell me that a moment ago they left in a wood of mine a man with dozens of stab-wounds; he was still breathing, and begged them for pity's sake to bring him some water and to help him to get

up. They say that they didn't dare to go near him and ran away, fearing that officers of the law would catch them there and hold them accountable for this incident (which is what happens to those who are found near a man who has been killed). That would have ruined them, since they had neither the skill nor the money to prove their innocence. What ought I to have said to them? It is certain that this act of humanity would have got them into difficulties.

How many innocent parties have been discovered to have been punished—I mean with no blame attached to their judges? And how many have never been discovered? Here is something that has happened in my time: some men have been condemned to death for murder; the sentence, if not pronounced, is at least settled and determined. At this juncture the judges are advised by the officials of a nearby lower court that they were holding some prisoners who had made a clean confession to that murder and thrown a decisive light on this business. They deliberate whether they should intervene to postpone the execution of the sentence already given against the first group. They consider the novelty of the situation, the precedent it would constitute for granting stays of execution, and the fact that the sentence has been passed according to law and the judges have no powers to change their minds. In short, those poor devils are sacrificed to judicial procedures.

[Then an ancient case that was similar, but not as bad because it did not involve loss of life. This paragraph ends with:] ^[C] How many sentences have I seen more criminal than the crime!

^[B] All this reminds me of certain ancient opinions: •that a man is forced to do wrong in detail if he wants to do right in gross, to commit injustices in little things if he wants to achieve justice in great ones; •that human justice is formed on the analogy of medicine, according to which

whatever is effective is also just and honest; •that nature itself goes against justice in most of its works (the Stoics); ^[C] •that nothing is intrinsically just, justice being a creation of custom and law (the Cyrenaics); and •that the wise man may justifiably commit larceny, sacrilege and any sort of lechery if he knows that it is profitable for him (the Theodorians).

^[B] It cannot be helped. My position, like that of Alcibiades, is that I shall never, if I can help it, submit to being judged by any man on a capital charge, where my honour and my life depend more on the energy and care of my attorney than on my innocence. I would risk a kind of justice that would take into account my good actions as well as bad ones, and give me as much to hope for as to fear. Lack of punishment is an inadequate reward for a man who does better than merely doing no wrong. Our justice extends to us only one of its hands, and the left one at that. Anyone who is subjected to it, whoever he may be, comes out of it with a loss.

^[C] In China—

a kingdom •whose government and sciences, without having had any contact with or knowledge of ours, surpass ours in many kinds of excellence, and •whose history teaches me that the world is more abundant and varied than the ancients or we ever realised

—the officials sent by the prince to inspect the state of his provinces, even as they punish those who act corruptly in their posts, also out of pure liberality reward those who have performed better than the average and better than the requirements of their duty. People appear before them not only to defend themselves but to gain something, and not simply to receive their pay but to be granted bounties.

^[B] Thank God, no judge has ever spoken to me as a judge in any case whatsoever, my own or a third party's, criminal or civil. No prison has had me inside it, even for a visit. Imagination makes the sight of a prison, even from the outside,

distressing to me. I so hunger after freedom that if anyone forbade me access to some corner of the Indies I would live slightly less at ease. And I shan't cower anywhere in hiding as long as I can find earth or sky open elsewhere. My God! How badly would I endure the condition in which I see so many people—pinned to one region of this kingdom, banned from entering our main cities and our courts and from using the public highways—because they have quarrelled with our laws! If the laws that I obey *threatened* as much as the tip of my finger, I would immediately go and find others, wherever they might be. All my little acts of prudence during these civil wars of ours are aimed at preventing the wars from interfering with my freedom to come and go.

Now, laws remain respected not because they are just but because they are laws. That is the mystical basis of their authority—they have no other. ^[C] It serves them well. They are made

- often by fools,
- even more often by people who fail in fairness because they hate equality, but
- always by *men*, vain and irresolute authors.

There is nothing so grossly, widely or regularly faulty as our laws. . . . ^[B] Our French laws, by their irregularity and lack of form, contribute somewhat to the confused and corrupt way they are seen to be applied and executed. Their commands are so confused and inconsistent that there is some excuse for our disobeying them and for our faulty interpretation, application and enforcement of them.

Whatever benefit we may get from experience, what we get from •foreign examples won't do much for our education if we get so little from such experience as we have of •ourselves, which is more familiar to us and certainly enough to inform us of what we need.

·SELF-KNOWLEDGE AS THE ROUTE TO HUMILITY·

I study myself more than any other subject. That is my metaphysics; that is my physics. . . . In this universe of things, I ignorantly and negligently let myself to be governed by the general law of the world. I shall know it sufficiently when I feel it. My knowledge could not make it change its path; it will not modify itself for my sake. It is folly to wish it to, and greater folly to be troubled about it, because it is necessarily uniform, public, and common. The goodness and power of the ruler of the universe should absolutely and totally free us from concern about his government.

Philosophical inquiries and meditations are good for nothing but to feed our curiosity. The philosophers very rightly refer us to the laws of nature, but these have nothing to do with such sublime knowledge. They—the philosophers—falsify them and show us nature's face painted in too high a colour and with too much make-up, which is why there is such a variety of portraits of this one subject. As nature has provided us with feet to walk with, so it she provided us with wisdom [*prudence*] to guide us in our lives. That wisdom is not as clever, strong and showy as the one they have invented, but it is pleasantly easy and beneficial; for a man who is lucky enough to know how to conduct himself simply and in an orderly way (that is, naturally), it *does* very well what the other *says* it will do. The more simply we entrust ourself to nature, the more wisely we do so. Oh what a sweet and soft and healthy pillow is ignorance and incuriosity, on which to rest a well-made head!

[B] I would rather be an expert on myself than on Cicero. I find enough in my own experience to make me wise, if I were a good student. Whoever recalls to mind his last bout of anger and the excesses to which that fever brought him sees the ugliness of that passion better than he can see it in Aristotle, and conceives an even more justified hatred

of it. Anyone who recalls the ills he has undergone, those that have threatened him, and the trivial incidents that have moved him from one state to another, is preparing for future changes and for recognising his condition. Even the life of Caesar has no more to show us than our own; a life whether imperial or plebeian is always a life affected by everything that can happen to a man. Just listen! We tell ourselves all that we chiefly need to know.

Someone who remembers having been so often wrong in his judgement—isn't he a fool if he doesn't become deeply distrustful of it thereafter? When I find myself convicted of a false opinion by another man's reasoning, what I learn from that is not so much

- the new thing he has told me or
- how ignorant I was of some particular matter (there's not much profit in that), but
- my weakness in general and the treachery of my understanding.

That helps me to reform the whole mass. I do the same with all my other errors, and I think this rule is of great use in my life. I don't regard a class of errors or an individual example of it as merely one stone that has made me stumble; I learn to distrust my gait in general and set about improving it. [C] To learn that one has said or done something foolish is nothing; one must learn that one is nothing but a fool, a much broader and important lesson.

[B] The slips that my memory has so often committed, even when it is at its most insistent that it is right, don't vanish without doing any good. It's no use *now* my memory's swearing to me and reassuring me; I shake my ears! The first opposition given to its testimony makes me suspend judgement, and I would not dare to trust it over any weighty matter or to stand warrant for it in another person's affairs. And I would always accept the truth in matters of fact from

another man's mouth rather than from mine, if it weren't for the fact that what I do from lack of memory is what others do even more often from lack of integrity.

If each man watched closely the effects and circumstances of the passions that dominate him, as I have done the ones that hold sway over me, he would see them coming and would somewhat slow down the violence and speed of their assault. They do not always leap straight at our throat: there are warnings and degrees: 'At first the gale whips up the foam-topped wavelets, then gradually the sea begins to heave, raising the billows higher, and surging from the deep to the very heavens.' [Virgil]

Within me, judgement holds a magisterial seat, or at least it earnestly tries to do so. It lets my feelings go their own way, including hatred and love (even my love for myself), without itself being worsened or corrupted by them. If it cannot reform the other qualities to align with itself, at least it does not let itself be deformed by them: it plays its role apart. The advice to everyone to *know himself* must have an important effect, since the god of learning and light had it planted on the front of his temple—the temple of Apollo at Delphi—as comprising all the counsel he had to give us. [C] Plato too says that wisdom is nothing but the executing of that command, and Socrates in Xenophon proves in detail that it is true.

[B] The difficulties and obscurity of any branch of learning are perceived only by those who have access to it; for some degree of intelligence is needed for one to become aware of not knowing something; to know that a door is shut against us, we must push it. [C] Which generates that Platonic subtlety:

those who know need not inquire, because they know already; neither is inquiry for those who do not know, because to inquire you need to know what you are inquiring into.

[B] Thus, in this matter of knowing oneself: the fact that each man is seen to be so sure and satisfied, that each man thinks he understands himself well enough, signifies that each man understands nothing about it—[C] as Socrates teaches Euthydemus in Xenophon.

[B] I, who make no other profession, find in myself such boundless depths and variety that my early learning bears no other fruit than to give me a sense of how much there remains for me to learn. It is to my weakness (so often admitted) that I owe my tendency to

- modesty,
- obedience to the beliefs that are prescribed for me,
- constant coolness and moderation in my opinions, and
- hatred for the pushy and quarrelsome arrogance that believes and trusts only in itself—a mortal enemy of discipline and truth.

Hear them pontificating! The very first idiocies they put forward are couched in the style in which men found religions and laws. [C] 'There is nothing more shocking than to see assent and approval dashing ahead of cognition and perception' [Cicero].

[B] Aristarchus said that in former times there were scarcely seven wise men in the world, whereas in his own days there were scarcely seven ignorant men.¹ Would we not have more reason than he did to say that in our time? Over-confident affirmation and stubbornness are express

¹ [This refers to the literary critic and editor Aristarchus of Samothrace, not the astronomer Aristarchus of Samos. Montaigne evidently, and perhaps rightly, took him to mean that there were scarcely seven men who would admit to being ignorant.]

signs of animal stupidity. This man over here has fallen on his nose a hundred times a day; but there he is on his *ergots*, as positive and unshaken as before.¹ You would say that some new soul, some new mental vigour has been infused into him. . . . The unteachable, stubborn fool! Does he think he acquires a new mind with which to start a new dispute?

·HUMAN IGNORANCE·

It is from my own experience that I affirm ·human· ignorance, which is in my judgement the most certain fact in the school of the world. Those who will not be convinced of their ignorance by so vain an example as me—or themselves—let them acknowledge it through Socrates, [C] the master of masters. The philosopher Antisthenes said to his pupils: ‘Let us go, you and I, to hear Socrates; I will be a pupil there along with you.’ And when he was maintaining the doctrine of his Stoic school that virtue was enough to make a life fully happy, with no need for anything at all—‘except’, he added, ‘the strength of Socrates’.

[B] This attention that I have long given to studying myself trains me also to judge passably well concerning others; there are few things on which I speak more aptly or acceptably. I often see and analyse my friends’ attributes more precisely than they do themselves. I told one of them things about himself that were so apposite that he was astonished, and I have informed [or warned, the French is *adverti*] him about himself. Having trained myself since boyhood to see my life reflected in other people’s, I have acquired a studious bent in that subject; and when I give my mind to it, few things around me that contribute to it escape my attention: looks, temperaments, speech. I study them all for what I should avoid and what I should imitate. Thus I reveal to my

friends their inner dispositions by their outer conduct. I do not *classify* this infinite variety of actions, so diverse and so disconnected, into sharply distinct sections and divisions, . . . ‘for there is no numbering of their many categories or of the names given to them’ [Virgil].

The learned mark off their ideas more specifically, and in detail. I, who can see no further than practice informs me, with no method, present my ideas in a general way and tentatively, feeling my way; as in my practice of giving my judgment in disconnected clauses, as something that cannot be said at once all in a lump. Relatedness and conformity are not to be found in low common souls such as ours. Wisdom is a solid and integral structure, each piece of which has its place and bears its mark: [C] ‘Wisdom alone is entirely self-contained’ [Cicero].

[B] I leave it to the *artistes*—and I do not know if they will get to the bottom of it, in a matter so confused, intricate and accidental—to arrange this infinite variety of features into groups, pin down our inconsistencies and impose some order. [Here *artistes* refers to people with high-level trained skills of some kind.] I find it hard not only to link our actions with one another but also to give any one of them a label of its own, based on some principal characteristic of it—so ambiguous they are and so multicoloured in various lights.

[C] What is commented on as rare in the case of Perseus, king of Macedonia—

namely that his mind, settling on no particular mode of being, wandered about among every kind of existence, manifesting such vagrant and free-flying *mœurs* that neither he nor anyone else knew what ·kind of· man he really was

¹ ‘Montaigne’s word *ergots* means the spurs or hackles of a gamecock. But it may also mean “ergos” or “ergotisms”, the quibbling use of Latin *ergo* (therefore) by a choplogic.’ [note by Frame]

—seems to me to apply to nearly everybody. And above all men I have seen one man of his rank [King Henry IV of France] to whom I think that conclusion would even more properly apply: no middle position, always carried from one extreme to the other, for undiscoverable reasons; no kind of course without zig-zagging and back-tracking; . . . so that the most true-to-life portrait anyone will be able to sketch of him one day will show that he strove and studied to make himself known as unknowable.

[B] Good strong ears are needed to hear oneself frankly judged; and since there are few who can undergo it without being hurt, those who risk undertaking it perform a remarkable act of friendship, because to wound and offend a man for his own good is to have a healthy love for him. I find it a rough task to judge someone in whom the bad qualities exceed the good. [C] Plato requires three attributes in anyone who wishes to examine the soul of another: knowledge, good will, boldness.

·LOVING CRITICISM·

[B] I have sometimes been asked what I thought I would have been good at if anyone had decided to employ me while I was at the right age. . . . My answer has been: ‘Nothing!’ And I cheerfully excuse myself for not knowing how to do anything that enslaves me to others. But I would have told my master some home truths and would, if he wanted me to, have commented on his *mœurs*—not wholesale by reading scholastic lessons to him (I know nothing about them and have observed no improvement among those who do), but by pointing things out as he went along, judging by running my eyes along each incident one at a time, simply and naturally, bringing him to see what the public opinion of him is and counteracting his flatterers.

(There is not one of us who would not be worse than our kings if he were constantly corrupted by that riff-raff as they are. How could it not be so if Alexander, that great king and philosopher, could not protect himself from them?)

I would have had enough loyalty, judgement and frankness for that. It would be an office without a name, otherwise it would lose its efficacy and grace. And it is a role that cannot be played as well by one man as another. For truth itself is not privileged to be used at any time and in any circumstances. The telling of it, noble though it is, has its boundaries and limits. The world being what it is, it often happens that someone lets a truth slip into a prince’s ear, not merely doing no good but doing harm, and indeed committing an injustice. No-one will ever convince me that a perfectly righteous rebuke may not be offered wrongly, or that the interest of the substance should not often yield to the interest of the form.

For this occupation, I would want a man who is content with his fortune—‘Who would be what he is, desiring nothing more’ [Martial]— and born to a middle rank. For one thing, his middling station would make it easier for him to communicate with all sorts of people; for another, he would not be afraid to strike deep, lively blows into his master’s mind for fear of losing his chance to rise higher. [C] And I would want *one* man to be appointed; for to scatter the privilege of such frankness and familiarity over *many* would create a damaging lack of respect. Indeed, I would require that one man to be someone who could, above all, be trusted to keep quiet.

[B] A king is not to be believed when he boasts of his steadfastness as he waits to encounter the enemy (in the interests of his glory) if he cannot (in the interests of his own virtue and improvement) tolerate the frank words of

a friend, words that have no other power than to make his ears smart, any other effects of them being in his own hands. Now, there is no category of man who has as much need of such true and frank counsels as kings do. They sustain a life lived in public and have to suit the opinions of a great many spectators: yet, since it is customary to conceal from them anything that disturbs their plans, they discover that they have, quite unawares, come to be loathed by their subjects for reasons that they could often have avoided (without even any loss to their pleasures) if they had been warned in time and corrected. Usually their favourites look out for themselves more than for their master; and this serves them well, for in truth most of duties of real friendship are hard and dangerous to attempt towards the sovereign, so that not only much good-will and frankness are needed but also considerable courage.

·SCEPTICISM ABOUT THE MEDICAL PROFESSION·

This jumble that I am scribbling here is nothing but a record of the *essais* [see Glossary] of my life; where the mind's health is concerned, it is exemplary enough if its instructions are taken in reverse! But where the body's health is concerned, no-one can supply more useful experience than I, who present it pure, not at all corrupted or worsened by art or by theorising. In the case of medicine, experience is on its own dunghill, where reason yields the whole field to it. Tiberius said that anyone who had lived for twenty years should be responsible for knowing, without medical aid, which things are harmful to his health and which are beneficial. [C] He might have learned that from Socrates, who—advising his followers to attend assiduously and devotedly to their health—added that if a man of intelligence was careful about his exercise, eating and drinking, it would be difficult for

him not to know better than any doctor what was good or bad for him.

[B] Certainly medicine professes always to have experience as the touchstone of its performance. So Plato was right to say that for someone to be a true physician he must have passed through all the illnesses he wants to cure and through all the symptoms and conditions he has to give an opinion on. It is reasonable that they should catch the pox if they want to know how to cure it! I would truly trust one who did; for the others pilot us like a man who remains seated at his table, painting seas, reefs and harbours, making a model boat 'sail' over them in absolute safety. Pitch him into the real thing and he doesn't know how to go about it. . . .

I have lived long enough to give an account of the regimen that has led me this far. Should anyone want to try it, I have tasted it first as his cupbearer! Here are a few items as memory supplies them. [C] I have no practice that hasn't been varied according to circumstances, but I note here those that I have most often seen at work and that have had most hold on me right up to this moment.

[B] My regimen is the same in sickness as in health: I use the same bed, same timetable, same food and same drink. I make absolutely no adjustments except for varying the amounts according to my strength and appetite. For me *health* means maintaining my usual condition without disturbance. . . . There is nothing I believe so certainly as this: that I cannot be harmed by practices that I have so long been accustomed to. *Habit* is what gives shape to our lives, whatever shape it likes; it is all-powerful in such matters; it is the cup of Circe,¹ which changes our nature as it sees fit. How many nations there are, at no great distance from us, who regard as ridiculous the fear of night dew that we find

¹ [In the *Odyssey*, supposedly by Homer, Circe was a sorceress who turned Odysseus's crew into swine.]

obviously harmful; and our boatmen and peasants laugh at it. You make a German ill if you put him to bed on a straw mattress, as you do an Italian on a feather one, or a Frenchman without bed-curtains or a fire. The stomach of a Spaniard cannot tolerate the way we eat: nor can ours the way the Swiss drink.

I was amused when a German in Augsburg attacked our open hearths, emphasizing their drawbacks with the same arguments that we ordinarily use against their stoves. And it is true that •their stifling heat and •the smell produced by the materials they are made of gives headaches to most of those who are not used to them; not to me. But on the other hand this heat is even, constant and general, without flame, without smoke, and without the draught that our open chimneys bring us; it has plenty of grounds for standing comparison with ours.

(Why don't we imitate the architecture of the Romans? For it is said that in antiquity fire was lit only *outside* the houses and at the foot of them; from there hot air was drawn into all the house through pipes built into the thickness of the walls surrounding the areas to be heated. I have seen that clearly indicated somewhere in Seneca, I forget where.)

That man in Augsburg, on hearing me praise the comforts and beauties of his city (which indeed merited it), started to pity me because I had to leave it; among the chief inconveniences he cited to me was the heavy-headedness that the fireplaces elsewhere would cause me. He had heard somebody make this complaint and linked it with us, custom preventing him from noticing it at home.

Any heat coming from a fire makes me weak and drowsy. Evenus said that fire was life's best condiment; but it is my

least favourite way of escaping the cold.

We are afraid of wine from the bottom of the barrel; in Portugal its aroma has them in raptures; it is the drink of princes.

In short, each nation has many customs and practices which another nation not only does not *have* but regards as barbarous and a cause of wonder.

•AN ASIDE ON BOOKS AND TRADITION• What are we to do with this populace that will receive only printed testimony, that won't believe men if they are not in print, or truth unless it be properly aged? [C] We set our stupidities in dignity when we set them in print. [B] For it—this populace—there is far more weight in saying 'I have read. . . ,' than in saying 'I have heard tell. . . .' But I—

- who do not disbelieve men's tongues any more than their pens, who
- know that people write as injudiciously as they speak, and who
- esteem this age as much as any past one

—am just as willing to rely on a friend of mine as on Aulus Gellius or Macrobius, and on what I have seen as on what they have written. [C] And just as they say that virtue is not greater for being longer, I similarly reckon that truth is no wiser for being more ancient.

[B] I often say that it is pure stupidity that sets us chasing after foreign and scholarly exemplars. They are as fruitful now as they were in the times of Homer and Plato.¹ But aren't we trying to impress people by our quotations rather than by the truth of what they say? As though it were a greater thing to borrow our proofs from the bookshops of Vascosan and Plantin than from what can be seen in our

¹ [Two previous translators took Montaigne to be saying that they are as *abundant* now as etc.; but the French speaks of their *fertilité*, which doesn't mean 'abundance'; and the sentence in that meaning of it is silly, and doesn't contrast with the next sentence (starting with 'But').]

village! Or is it that we don't have the wit to select and evaluate what happens in front of us and and to judge it keenly enough to draw examples from it? For if we say that we lack the authority needed to produce faith in our testimony, we are off the point. Because in my opinion the most ordinary, commonplace and familiar things, if we could present them in their proper light, can form the greatest of nature's wonders and the most amazing examples, notably on the subject of human actions. ·END OF ASIDE ON BOOKS AND TRADITION·

·DIVERSITY IN WAYS OF LIFE·

Now, on this topic of mine (leaving aside the examples I know from books ^[C] and what Aristotle said of Andro of Argos, that he crossed the arid sands of Libya without drinking), ^[B] a nobleman who has performed honourably in several occupations said in my presence that he had journeyed without drinking from Madrid to Lisbon in the height of summer. He is vigorous for his age, and there is nothing extraordinary in his way of life except that he can go for two or three months—indeed, for a year, he has told me—without drinking. He feel thirst but lets it pass; he holds that it is a craving that easily weakens by itself. He drinks more on impulse than from necessity or for enjoyment.

Here is another example. Not long ago I came across one of the most learned men in France, a man of more than moderate wealth, studying in a corner of a hall that had been partitioned off for him with tapestries; and around him the racket of his undisciplined menservants. He told me—^[C] and Seneca said much the same of himself—^[B] that he found their hubbub useful: it was as though when battered by that din he could withdraw and close in on himself so as to meditate, and that those turbulent voices hammered his thoughts right in. [An account of how he had acquired this

habit in his student days, and an anecdote about Socrates' ability to think amid noise, with the comment 'I am quite the opposite; my mind is delicate and easy to distract; when it is absorbed in itself, the least buzzing of a fly murders it.' Followed by remarks about Seneca's attitude to luxury, ending with:] That which the customs of his day led him to count as an austerity our own make us think of as an indulgence.

Look at the difference between my farm-labourers' life and mine. Scythians and Indians have nothing more remote from my powers or my ways. I know I have taken some boys out of begging and into my service; soon afterwards they left me—both my cuisine and their livery—just to return to their former life. I came across one of them gathering mussels from a ditch for his dinner; neither by entreaty nor by threats could I pull him away from the sweet savour he found in poverty. Beggars have their distinctions and their pleasures as do rich men, and, so it is said, their own political dignities and orders.

·THE POWER OF HABIT·

These are effects of habit. It can it can shape us not only

- to whatever form it pleases (which is why, say the wise, we should choose the best form, which habit will promptly make easy for us), but also
- for change and variation (which is the noblest and most useful of its teachings).

The best of my bodily qualities is that I am flexible and not very stubborn; some of my inclinations are more proper to me than others, more usual and more agreeable, but with very little effort I turn away from them and easily slip into the opposite style.

A young man ought to shake up his rules in order to awaken his powers and stop them from getting mouldy and

stale. And no way of life is more feeble and stupid than one guided by rules and instilled habit: 'Does he want to be borne as far as the first milestone? Then he consults his almanack to find out the best time. Has he got a sore in the corner of an eye? Then he consults his horoscope before buying some ointment.' [Juvenal] He will often plunge even into excess, if he takes my advice. Otherwise, the least debauch will ruin him; he will make himself disagreeable and clumsy in society. The most unsuitable quality in an honest man [see Glossary] is to be over-fastidious and tied to one idiosyncratic way of life—one with his individual stamp on it. And it is idiosyncratic if it is not pliable and supple. It is shameful for a man to keep from doing what he sees his companions do, because he cannot or dares not. Such men should stay in their kitchens! In anyone else it is unbecoming; but in a military man it is vile and intolerable; he, as Philopoemen said, should get accustomed to all kinds of life's changes and hardships.

Although I was trained as much as possible for freedom and adaptability, nevertheless as I grow old I have carelessly let myself become fixed in certain forms. (My age is past training, and now has no other concern than to hold its own.) Without my noticing it, custom has imprinted its stamp on me in some things, doing this so well that I regard as *excess* any departure from it. I cannot, without great effort,

- sleep by day,
- eat between meals,
- eat breakfast,
- go to bed after supper without a considerable interval
[C] of about three hours,
- [B] make children except before going to sleep, or make them standing up,
- remain soaking with sweat,

- drink either water or wine unmixed,
- remain for long with my head uncovered, or
- have my haircut after dinner.

[He adds some further *molleses* [= 'niceties' or 'weaknesses'], mainly concerning the conduct of meals.]

·BODILY NEEDS AND MEDICAL INTRUSIONS·

[B] I owe many such *molleses* to habit, but nature has also brought me some, such as not being able to stand more than two full meals a day without overloading my stomach, or to have no meal go without filling myself with wind, parching my mouth and upsetting my appetite; and suffering from too long exposure to evening dew. During these last few years when military duties involve (as often happens) a whole night on some military task, my stomach begins to bother me after five or six hours; I have a splitting headache and don't get through the night without vomiting. Then while the others go to breakfast, I go to bed; and after a sleep I am as cheerful as before.

I had always understood that evening dew formed early in the night; but for some years I was often closely in touch with a nobleman who is imbued with the belief that such dew is more severe and dangerous two or three hours before sunset (when he carefully avoids going out) and he regards the night-time dew as negligible. He imprinted this on me—not so much his opinion but his feeling.

What are we to make of the fact that even doubt and research strikes our imagination and changes us? Those who yield suddenly to these propensities bring total ruin on themselves. I am sorry for several gentlemen who, through the stupidity of their doctors, they shut themselves up indoors while still young and healthy. It would be better to suffer a cold than to lose the enjoyment of social life forever, through disuse, by giving up such a general practice

·as going out at night· . . . Let us extend our hold on things by every means. Usually if you stubborn things out you toughen yourself, correcting your constitution, as Caesar did his epilepsy, lessening it by treating it as negligible. We should conform to the best rules, but not enslave ourselves to them except in such cases (if there are any) in which such slavery is useful.

·ASIDE ON MOVING ONE'S BOWELS.· Both kings and philosophers excrete; and so do ladies. Public lives are devoted to ceremony; mine, obscure and private, avails itself of all the natural ways of relieving oneself; also, being a soldier and a Gascon are qualities that somewhat tend towards openness. And so of that activity I shall say that it needs to be •consigned to a set **time** at night to which we should subject ourselves by force of habit, as I have done; but not (as I have done as I grow old) •subject ourselves to a concern for a particularly comfortable **place** and seat for this function and •make it tiresome by slowness and fastidiousness.

All the same, is it not somewhat excusable to require more care and cleanliness for our dirtiest functions? ^[C] 'By nature man is a clean and neat creature' [Seneca]. Of all the natural functions, that is the one I am least willing to have interrupted. ^[B] I have known many military men inconvenienced by the irregularity of their bowels. My bowels and I never fail to keep our rendezvous, which is when I jump out of bed, unless some urgent business or illness disturbs us. ·END OF ASIDE ON MOVING ONE'S BOWELS.·

So, as I was saying, my only judgment about how the sick are best treated is that they should keep to the pattern of life in which they have been brought up and trained. *Any* change is disturbing and hurtful. . . . Yet the sick are prescribed a way of life that is not only new but contrary ·to their old one·, a switch that a healthy man could not endure. Prescribe water for a 70-year-old Breton; shut a sailorman

up in vapour-bath; forbid a Basque manservant to go for walks! They are deprived of motion and finally of breath and the light of day: 'Is life worth that much?' someone wrote, And: 'We are compelled to deprive our souls of what they are used to; to stay alive we must cease to live! Should I regard as still alive those men for whom the air they breathe and the light they are guided by have become a burden?' [Maximianus] If the caretakers of the sick do no other good, they do at least prepare their patients early for death, gradually undermining and cutting off their enjoyment of life.

When healthy and when ill, I have willingly let myself follow my urgent appetites. I give great authority to my desires and inclinations. I do not like curing one ill by another; I hate remedies that are more burdensome than the disease. Being •subjected to colic [see Glossary] and •made to abstain from the pleasure of eating oysters—that's two ills for one. The illness hurts us on one side, the diet on the other. Since we are at risk of being wrong, let us risk what gives us pleasure! The ·social· world does the reverse, thinking that nothing does you good unless it hurts; it is suspicious of ease.

In many things my appetite has of its own accord quite happily accommodated and adapted itself to the well-being of my stomach. When I was young I liked the tartness and pungency of sauces; my stomach being subsequently troubled by them, my taste for them at once followed its lead. ^[C] Wine is bad for the sick: it is the first thing I lose my taste for ·when I am unwell·, my tongue finding it unpleasant, invincibly unpleasant. ^[B] Anything the taste of which I find unpleasant does me harm; nothing that I swallow hungrily and with zest harms me. I have never been harmed by anything I have done that was really pleasant to me. And that is why I have to a large extent made medical prescriptions give way to my pleasure.

·ASIDE ON MONTAIGNE'S ENTRY INTO SEX:· When I was young—when shining Cupid flew here and there about me, resplendent in his saffron tunic' [Catullus]—I yielded as freely and as thoughtlessly as anyone to the desire that then held me in its grip, 'and I fought not without glory' [Horace], though more in continuation and endurance than in brief intensity. . . . There is indeed some worry and wonder in confessing at what tender an age I chanced to fall first into Cupid's power. It was indeed by chance, for it was long before the age of choice and knowledge. I do not remember anything about myself back then. . . . ·END OF ASIDE·

The physicians usually adjust their rules, beneficially, to the violence of the sharp cravings that come upon sick people; no great desire can be thought of that is so strange and vicious that nature is not involved in it. And then, what a great thing it is to satisfy the imagination. In my opinion that faculty is all-important, or at least more important than any other. The most grievous and frequent of ills are those that imagination loads on us. From several points of view I like that Spanish saying *Defienda me Dios de my* ['God save me from myself']. When I am ill, what I lament is that I have no desire that gives me the satisfaction of satisfying it; if I had such a desire, medicine would hardly stop me from attending to it. And when I am well; I now have scarcely anything left to hope for or to want. It is miserable to be slack and feeble even in one's wishes!

The art of medicine is not so fixed that we cannot find some authority for doing whatever we do. Medicine changes according to the climate, according to the phases of the moon, according to Fernel and according to Scaliger [physicians to Henry II]. If your doctor does not find it good for you to sleep, to use wine or some particular food, don't worry; I will find you another who does not agree with him. There's no limit to the variety of medical arguments and opinions. I saw a

wretched patient, weak and dying of thirst as part of his cure, who was later laughed at by another doctor who condemned that treatment as harmful. Hadn't his suffering been to some purpose? Well there is a practitioner of that trade who recently died of the stone, and who had availed himself of extreme abstinence to fight his illness; his colleagues say that on the contrary this fasting had dried him up and baked the gravel [see Glossary] in his kidneys.

I have noticed that when I am wounded or sick, talking excites me and does me as much harm as anything wrong that I do. Speaking takes it out of me and tires me, since my voice is loud and strained, so that when I have needed to have a word in the ear of the great on weighty affairs, I have often put them to the trouble of asking me to lower it.

The following tale is worth a digression. Someone in one of the Greek schools used to talk loudly as I do. The master of ceremonies sent word to tell him to speak lower. 'Let him send me', he replied, 'word of the tone he wants me to adopt.' The master replied that he should take his tone from the ears of the man he was addressing. That was well said, provided it is taken to mean: 'Speak according to the business you have with your hearer.' For if it means 'It is enough that he hears you' or 'Be guided by him', I do not think he was right. The tone and movement of the voice contribute to the expression of my meaning; it is up to me to control them so as to be understood.

There is a voice for instructing, a voice for flattering, a voice for scolding. I want my voice not only to reach the man but perhaps to strike him or pierce him. When I am barking at my footman with a rough and harsh voice, a fine thing it would be if he said to me 'Speak more softly, Master. I hear you quite well!' ^(C) 'There is a kind of voice that impresses the hearer not by its volume but its peculiar quality' [Quintilian]. ^(B) Speech belongs half to the speaker, half to the hearer. The

latter must prepare himself to receive it according to how it moves; just as among those who play hand-ball the receiver steps back and makes ready according to the movements of the striker and the form of his stroke.

·URGING PATIENCE WITH ONE'S ILLNESSES·

Experience has also taught me that we are ruined by impatience. Evils have their life and their limits, ^[C] their maladies and their good health.

The constitution of illnesses is formed on the pattern of the constitution of animals. They have their fortune and their days limited from their birth; anyone who tries imperiously to shorten them by forcefully interrupting their course lengthens and multiplies them, stimulating them instead of quietening them down. I am of Crantor's opinion that we should neither resist illnesses stubbornly and rashly nor succumb to them out of weakness, but give way to them naturally, according to their condition and our own. ^[B] We should give free passage to diseases, and I find that they stay less long with me, who let them go their way; and I have rid myself of some that are held to be the most tenacious and stubborn, doing this through their own decline, with no help and without the art of medicine, and against its prescriptions. Let us allow Nature to do something! She understands her business better than we do.—'But so-and-so died of it!'—So will you, if not of that illness then of some other. And how many with three doctors on their tails have nevertheless died of it? Precedent is a hazy mirror, reflecting all things in all ways. If the medicine tastes nice, take it; that is always that amount of immediate gain. ^[C] I will not jib at its name or colour if it is delicious and whets my appetite for it. Pleasure is a principal kind of profit.

^[B] I have allowed to grow old and die a natural death within me: colds, gouty discharges, diarrhoea, palpitations of the

heart, migraines, and other ailments; I lost them just when I had half-trained myself to harbour them. They are conjured away better by courtesy than by defiance. We should quietly suffer the laws of our condition. We are born to grow old, to grow weak and to fall ill, despite all medicine. That is the first lesson the Mexicans teach their children when, on leaving their mother's womb, they greet them thus: 'Child, you have come into the world to endure; endure, suffer, and keep quiet.'

It is unjust to moan because something has happened to one that can happen to anyone: ^[C] 'If anything is unjustly decreed against you alone, that is the time to complain' [Seneca]. ^[B] Look at this old man praying God to keep him entirely healthy and strong—that is to say, to restore his youth. 'You fool! What do you hope to gain by such useless, childish prayers?' [Ovid]. Is it not madness? His condition does not allow it. ^[C] Gout, gravel and indigestion go with long years just as heat, wind and rain go with long journeys. Plato does not believe that Aesculapius was at pains to provide remedies to prolong life in a weak and wasted body, useless to its country, useless to its vocation and useless for producing healthy robust sons. He does not find such a concern consistent with divine justice and wisdom, which should guide all things to utility. ^[B] My good man, it is over; nobody can put you back on your feet; at most they will bandage and prop you up for a bit, ^[C] prolonging your misery an hour or so. . . .

^[B] We should learn to endure what we cannot avoid. Our life is composed, like the harmony of the world, of contrary things as well as of different tones—sweet and harsh, sharp and flat, soft and loud. If a musician liked only some of them, what would he have to say? He should know how to use *all* of them and blend them together. So too should we with good and ill, which are of one substance with our life. Our

existence is impossible without this mixture, and one strand is no less necessary for it than the other. . . .

I do little consulting about the ailments that I feel, for those ·medical· fellows are domineering when they have you at their mercy: they take over your ears with their prognostics. Once, taking advantage of me when I was weak and ill, they treated me insultingly with their dogmas and their masterly frowns, threatening me now with great suffering, now with imminent death. I was not floored by them, or dislodged from my place; but I was jolted and jostled. If my judgement was neither changed nor confused by them, it was at least preoccupied. It—·medical consultation·—is always agitation and struggle.

Now, I treat my imagination as gently as I can, and would relieve it, if I could, of all trouble and conflict. We should help it, stroke it, and deceive it if we can. My intellect is suited to this service: it never runs out of plausible arguments for anything. If it persuaded as well as it preaches, it would help me out most happily.

·MONTAIGNE'S INTELLECT MAKES LIGHT OF HIS KIDNEY-STONES·

Would you like an example? It—·my intellect·—tells me:

- that it is for my own good that I have the stone; that structures as old as I am are naturally subject to seepage (it is time they began to totter apart and decay; that is a common necessity, otherwise would not some new miracle have been performed just for me? I am paying the debt due to old age and could not get off more lightly);

- that the company I have should console me, since I have fallen into the most routine illness for men of my age (on all sides I see them afflicted by the same kind of illness, and

their companionship honours me, since that malady likes to go after the aristocracy: its essence is noble and dignified); and

- that few of the men who are stricken with it get off more lightly—and they pay the penalty of a nasty diet and unpleasant daily doses of medicine, whereas I owe everything to my good fortune. . . . For that easy and abundant discharge of gravel which I have often been granted by the kindness of nature, those men had to pay a thousand vows to Aesculapius and as many crowns to their doctor. [C] (Even the propriety of my behaviour in ordinary company is untroubled, and I can hold my urine for ten hours at a time—as long as the next man.)

[B] ‘The fear of this illness’, it says, ‘used to terrify you when it was unknown to you;’¹ the cries and despair of those who make it worse by their lack of fortitude created a horror of it in you. This illness afflicts the parts of your body by which you have most sinned. You are a man with some sense of right and wrong: ‘Only undeserved punishment comes with cause for anger’ [Ovid]. Reflect on this punishment; it is mild indeed compared with others, and shows fatherly kindness. Reflect on how late it appeared; it occupies with its vexations only the season of your life that is wasted and barren anyway, having held off, as if by agreement, from the excesses and pleasures of your youth,

‘The fear and pity felt by people for this illness gives you material for vainglory. You may have purged your judgement and cured your reason of this quality, but your friends still recognize a tincture of it in your make-up. There is pleasure in hearing them say about you: “There’s fortitude for you! There’s long-suffering!” They see you sweating under the

¹ [From here to the mention of the Styx on the next page, Montaigne’s whitewashing intellect is speaking to him; mostly using the familiar *tu*, which occurs hardly anywhere else in this essay.]

strain [and he lists various fairly horrible signs of the illness], while you converse with those about you, keeping your usual expression, occasionally joking with your servants, holding up your side in a tense argument, making excuses for your pain and minimizing your suffering.

'Do you remember those men of past times who greedily sought out troubles so as to keep their virtue in trim and to practise it? Put the case that nature is carrying and pushing you into that glorious school, which you would never have entered of your own free will. If you tell me that yours is a dangerous and mortal disease, what others are not? For it is a doctor's trick to pick out some which they say do not go in a direct line towards death; what does it matter if they only lead there incidentally, floundering along by-ways in the same direction as the road that leads us there?

[C] You are not dying because you are ill; you are dying because you are alive. Death kills you well enough without help from illness. In some cases illnesses have postponed death, the sick living longer precisely because it seemed to them that they were dying. Just as some wounds are medicinal and salutary, so too are some illnesses.

[B] 'Colic is often as tenacious of life as you¹ are; we know of men in whom it has lasted from childhood to extreme old age; and it would have gone along with them further if they had not deserted it. You kill it more than it kills you. And if it did present you with the idea of imminent death, wouldn't it be doing a good turn to a man of such an age ·as yours· to bring him back to thoughts about his end?

[C] 'And, what is worse, you have no reason left to want to be cured. Come what may, the common fate will call you any day. [B] Reflect on how skilfully and gently your colic makes you lose your taste for life and detaches you from

the world, not compelling you by •tyrannical subjection—like many other afflictions that you see in old people, which keep them continually fettered, with no relief from infirmity and pain—but by •warnings and instructions repeated at intervals, interspersed with long periods of relief, as if to give you the means to meditate on its lesson and to go over it again at leisure. To give you the means to make a sound judgement and to conduct yourself like a brave man, it shows you the state of your whole condition, both good and bad, and on a single day a life that is now very joyful, now unbearable. If you don't embrace death, at least you shake its hand once a month. [C] That gives you more reason to hope that death will snatch you one day without warning, and that with death having so often brought you as far as the jetty, and with you trusting that you are still on the usual terms ·with it·, you and your trust will have crossed the water [the Styx] unawares. . . .'

·THE 'BLESSINGS' OF KIDNEY-STONES·

[B] I am obliged to fortune for so often using the same sort of weapons to attack me; it forms me and trains me for them by use, hardens me and makes me used to them. I now know pretty well what it will cost me to be quit of them.

[C] (Lacking a natural memory, I make one from paper; and when some new symptom occurs in my disease, I write it down. So that now—after I have gone through virtually every kind of episode—when some appalling crisis threatens me, I am no longer at a loss to find, by flipping through my notes (which are disconnected like the leaves of the Sybils), something in my past experience to cheer me up by offering a favourable prognosis.)

¹ [This is *vous*, which can be plural; and twice more in this paragraph. Its last sentence reverts to *tu*.]

[B] Familiarity serves to give me better hopes for the future; this way of voiding ·the stone· has continued for so long now that it is probable that •nature will not change this way ·of doing things· and that •nothing worse will happen in it than what I already feel. Besides, the nature of this illness is not ill-suited to my hasty and impetuous disposition. When it makes mild assaults on me, it frightens me; for then it is ·settling in· for a long time. But by nature it has vigorous and violent spurts; it gives me a thorough shaking up for a day or two.

My kidneys held out for an age without deterioration: it will soon be another age since they changed their condition.¹ Evils have their period, like good things; perhaps this misfortune is at its end. Old age reduces the heat of my stomach, so that it digests things less perfectly and dispatches undigested matter to my kidneys. Why could it not be the case that the heat of my kidneys has. . . .been similarly reduced, •making them unable to continue to petrify my phlegm and •obliging nature to find some other means of purging it? It is clear that the passing years have made some of my rheums dry up; why not then those excretions that provide the raw material for the gravel?

But is there anything as sweet as that sudden revolution when I pass from the extreme pain of voiding my stone and recover in a flash the beautiful light of health, full and free, as happens in our sudden and sharpest colic attacks? Is there anything in that suffered pain that can outweigh the joy of so prompt a recovery? How much more beautiful health seems to me after illness, when they are such close neighbours that I can study each in the other's presence, each in its full armour, defying each other as though intending to have a head-on battle. Just as the Stoics say that the vices are

useful for making virtue prized and helping it along, we can say—with better justification and less risk of error—that nature has lent us suffering for the honour and service of pleasure and painlessness. . . .

The worst thing I see in other maladies is that they are less grievous in their immediate effects than in what comes later: one spends a year convalescing, all the time full of weakness and fear. The route to recovery is so hazardous, with so many levels, that it is never done; before they have unmuffled you of a scarf, and then of a cap; before they have allowed you to return to the enjoyment of

- fresh air,
- wine,
- your wife,
- melons,

it is quite something if you have not relapsed into some new misery. My illness has this privilege: ·when it leaves· it makes a clean break. The others always leave some imprint and change for the worse, which makes the body susceptible to some fresh woe; they lend each other a hand. We can condone illnesses that are content with their own possession of us without extending it or introducing their sequels. But those whose journey through us produces some useful result are ·not merely condonable but· courteous and gracious. Since my colic ·began·, I find myself freed from other ailments—more, it seems to me, than I was before. I have not had a fever since! I reason that the frequent and extreme vomiting I suffer purges me, and that the losses of appetite and unusual fastings I go through digest my morbid humours, and nature voids in those stones its superfluous and harmful matter.

Do not tell me that this is a medicine too dearly bought.

¹ [In one of the manuscript sources the two 'ages' are given as 40 and 14 years respectively.]

What about those stinking potions, cauterizations, incisions, sweat-baths, diets and those many forms of treatment that often bring death upon us because we cannot withstand their violence? So when I have an attack, I regard it as medicine; when freed from it, I regard that as a lasting and complete deliverance.

Another blessing of my illness in particular is that it pretty much gets on with its own business and lets me get on with mine unless I lack courage. In its greatest throes, I have held out for ten hours on horseback. I could have said to myself: 'Just put up with it! You need no other regimen; play, dine, ride, do this and then do that if you can: your indulgences will do more good than harm.' Say that to a man with syphilis, the gout or a hernia! The constraints of other illnesses are more all-embracing: they restrict our activities, upset our way of life, and require every aspect of our lives to take account of them. Mine only pinches the skin; it leaves your understanding and your will at your disposal, and your tongue, and your hands, and your feet. It awakens you rather than putting you to sleep. It is the soul that is attacked by a burning fever, floored by epilepsy, dislocated by an intense migraine—and, in short, struck senseless by all the illnesses that hurt the whole body and the noblest organs. Here (in my colic) it is not attacked. If things go badly for it, that is its own fault; it is betraying, surrendering and disarming itself.

Only fools let themselves be persuaded that this solid, massy substance concocted within our kidneys can be dissolved by draughts of medicine. So, once it starts to move, there is nothing to do but to give it passage; it will take it anyway.

I notice also another particular advantage: it is an illness in which we have little to guess about. It spares us the infinitely distressing turmoil into which other ills

cast us through uncertainty about their causes, properties and progress. We have no need listen to the opinions of specialists; our senses show us *what* it is and *where* it is.

With such arguments, both strong and feeble, I try, as Cicero did with the affliction that was his old age, to benumb and delude my power of thought and to put ointment on its wounds. And tomorrow, if they grow worse, we will provide other escape-routes for them.

[In a ^[C]-tagged paragraph Montaigne reports a more recent change—a nasty one—in his illness, and says that he 'got much the better of it'. Then:] Can I feel something crumbling? Do not expect me to waste time having my pulse and urine checked so as to take some botherome precaution; I will be in time to *feel* the anguish without prolonging it through the anguish of fear. ^[C] Anyone who is afraid of suffering is *already* suffering fear.

Besides, the uncertainty and ignorance of those who presume to explain the workings of nature and its inner processes, and the many false prognostications of their art, force us to recognize that nature has utterly unknown ways of its own. There is great uncertainty, variability and obscurity in its promises and threats. Except for old age (which is an undoubted sign of the approach of death), in all our other ailments I see few signs of the future on which we can base our predictions.

^[B] I judge myself from actual sensation, not from reasoning; what good would reasoning do, since I intend to use only waiting and endurance. Do you want to know how much I gain from that? Look at those who act otherwise, and who rely on so many different persuasions and counsels: how often their imagination oppresses them without help from the body! Many times when I was safe and free from these dangerous attacks, I have enjoyed consulting doctors about them as though one was just starting. I endured the doom

of their horrible conclusions in great comport, and remained that much •more indebted to God for his mercy and •better instructed in the vanity of that art.

[A paragraph about the importance of activity for the young, and the dangers to everyone of having too much sleep.]

·HOW MONTAIGNE COPES WITH OLD AGE·

I like a hard bed all to myself, indeed without my wife (royal fashion!), pretty well covered up. My bed is never warmed, but since I have grown old they give me, whenever I need them, coverlets to warm my feet and stomach. . . . If I am fastidious about anything in my way of life, it is more about sleeping than anything else; but on the whole I yield to necessity, and adjust to it, as well as anyone. Sleep has taken up a large part of my life, and even at my age I sleep eight or nine hours at a stretch. I am ridding myself of this propensity towards laziness, and am obviously the better for it. I feel some effect of this change, but after three days it is gone. And I know hardly anyone who can live with less sleep when the need arises, who keeps working more continuously, or for whom drudgery is less of a burden.

My body is capable of sustained exertions but not of sudden, violent ones. These days I avoid activities that are violent and make me sweat: my limbs get tired before they become warm. I stay on my feet for a whole day, and I don't weary of walking. Over paved roads, however, I have since my youth preferred to go on horseback; when on foot I get muddy right up to my buttocks; and in our streets small men are liable to be jostled and elbowed aside, for want of an imposing appearance. And I have always liked to rest, lying or seated, with my legs at least as high as the bench.

No occupation is as enjoyable as soldiering—an occupation both noble in its practice (since valour is the strongest,

most magnanimous and proudest of all the virtues) and noble in its purpose: no service is more just and universal than protecting the peace and greatness of one's country.

You enjoy

- the comradeship of so many noble, young and active men,
- the regular sight of so many sublime dramas,
- the freedom of straightforward companionship,
- a manly, informal mode of life,
- the diversion of hundreds of different activities,
- the heart-stirring sound of martial music which delights your ears and arouses your soul, as well as
- the honour of this activity, even its severity and hardship,

[C] which Plato rates so low in his Republic that he allocates a share in them to women and children. As a volunteer soldier, [B] you •assign to yourself particular tasks and risks according to your judgement of their brilliance and their importance; and •see when life itself may justifiably be sacrificed to them: 'It is indeed beautiful, I think, to die in battle' [Virgil].

To be afraid of the common risks that beset so great a throng, to not dare to do what so many kinds of souls dare, is for a heart immeasurably weak and base. Comradeship gives confidence even to children. If others surpass you in knowledge, in grace, in strength or in fortune, you have external causes to blame; but if you yield to them in fortitude of soul, you have only yourself to blame. Death is more abject, lingering and painful in bed than in combat; fevers and catarrhs are as painful and as fatal as volleys from harquebuses. Anyone who could bear with valour the mischances of ordinary life would have no need for more courage to become a soldier. . . .

[B] I was born with all my senses intact and virtually perfect. My stomach is comfortably sound, and so is my

head; both usually hold up during my bouts of fever. The same applies to my respiration. I have exceeded the birthday that some nations have not unreasonably laid down as the termination of life, one so just that nobody was permitted to go beyond it.¹ Yet I still have remissions which, though short and variable, are so flawless that they lack nothing of that pain-free health of my youth. I am not speaking of liveliness and vigour; it is not reasonable that *they* should accompany me beyond their limits: 'I can no longer endure waiting on a doorstep in the pouring rain' [Horace].

My face immediately betrays me, and my eyes; all changes in me begin there, and seem a little worse than they really are. My friends often pity me before I am aware of any cause. My looking-glass does not alarm me, because even in my youth I would sometimes have—as I do now—a muddy complexion and an ill-omened look, without serious consequences; so that the doctors, finding inside me no cause for that outward deterioration, attributed it to my mind and to some secret passion gnawing away within me.

·THE SOUL IN A SICK BODY·

They were wrong. My body and I would get on rather better if it obeyed my orders as much as my soul does! Back then, my soul was not only free from muddiness but was full of joy and satisfaction—as it usually is, half because of its intrinsic nature and half by its design. 'The illnesses of my mind do not affect my joints' [Ovid].

I hold that this disposition of my soul has often helped my body to get up after its falls. My body is often knocked low whereas my soul, even when not merry, is at least calm and tranquil. I had a quartan fever for four or five months, which quite disfigured me; yet my mind still went on its way not merely peacefully but happily. Once the pain has

gone, the weakness and languor do not distress me much. I know of several bodily afflictions which are horrifying even to *name* but which I would fear less than hundreds of current disturbances and distresses of the mind that I see at work in others. I go along with my inability to run; it is enough that I crawl. Nor do I lament the natural decline that has me in its grip. . . .any more than I regret having a life-span that is not as long and massive as an oak's.

I have no cause to complain of my thought-processes; few thoughts in my life have ever disturbed even my sleep, except when concerned with desire (which woke me without distressing me). I do not dream much; and when I do, it is of grotesque things and of chimeras usually produced by pleasant thoughts, more ridiculous than sad. I hold that dreams are indeed faithful interpreters of our inclinations, but it takes skill to classify them and understand them. [C] 'It is not surprising that men find again in their dreams things that occupy them in their lives, things they think about, worry about, gaze upon and do when they are awake' [Accius].

Plato says, furthermore, that it is wisdom's task to extract from dreams information telling of future events. I see nothing in that, except for the wondrous experiences related by Socrates, Xenophon and Aristotle—great men of irreproachable authority. Historians say that the Atlantes never dream. (And that they never eat anything that has been slaughtered, a fact which I mention because it may be why they do not dream; since Pythagoras prescribed a certain preparatory diet designed to encourage appropriate dreams.) Mine are gentle, and do not bring on bodily agitation or talking in my sleep. I have known in my time some who have been astonishingly troubled by their dreams. Theon the philosopher walked while he dreamed. . . .

¹ [A [C] -tagged clause says that this was the 50th birthday, and that Montaigne was six years beyond it.]

·FOOD·

[B] At table I rarely exercise a choice, tackling the first and nearest dish; I do not like shifting about from one taste to another. I dislike a crowd of dishes and courses as much as any other crowd. . . .

I frequently eat salted meats but prefer my bread unsalted; the baker in my own kitchen (contrary to local custom) serves no other at my table. When I was a boy I was corrected mainly for refusing things that are usually best liked at that age: sugar candies, jams and pastries. My tutor opposed this hatred of dainty foods as being itself a kind of daintiness. And indeed it is nothing but finicking over your food, whatever it applies to. Rid a boy of a particular and obstinate love of coarse-bread, bacon or garlic, and you rid him of a finical taste. [The paragraph continues with some rather obscure remarks attacking those who ‘find ordinary everyday foods insipid’. That theme is one strand in what follows:]

·ASIDE ON BRINGING UP BOYS· If I had sons I would readily wish them a fortune like mine. God gave me a good father (who got nothing from me apart from my acknowledgement of his goodness—one cheerfully given); from the cradle he sent me to be brought up in some poor village of his, keeping me there until I was weaned—longer in fact, bringing me up to the commonest and humblest way of life. . . .

Never take on the responsibility for their upbringing yourselves, let alone giving it to your wives; let them be fashioned by fortune, under the laws of the common people and the laws of nature; leave it to custom to train them to frugality and austerity, so that ·in due course· they’ll have to move away from rigorousness rather than struggling to achieve it.

His attitude in this matter also had another goal: to bring me closer to the common-folk and to the class of men who need our help; he reckoned that I was obliged to attend to the man who extends his arms to me rather than to the one who turns his back on me. And the reason why he gave me godparents at baptism drawn from people of the most abject poverty was to bind and attach me to them.

His plan has turned out pretty well. I like doing things for lowly people, either because there is more glory in it or else from natural compassion, which has infinite power over me. [C] The side that I will condemn in these wars of ours I will condemn more harshly when it is flourishing and prosperous; I will be somewhat reconciled to it when I see it wretched and crushed.¹ How I love to reflect on the fine spirit of Chelonis, daughter and wife of kings of Sparta! While her husband Cleombrotus had the edge over her father Leonidas in the conflicts in her city, she acted as a good daughter, rallying to her father in his exile, in his misery, and opposing the victor. Did the odds switch? There she is!, her will changed with the change of fortune, courageously taking the side of her husband, whom she followed wherever his downfall drove him, having, it seems, no choice but to rush to the side where there was more need for her and where she would better show her compassion. . . . ·END OF ASIDE ON BRINGING UP BOYS·

Long sittings at table [C] annoy me and [B] disagree with me, since—lacking better self-control—I go on eating as long as I am there; I probably formed this habit as a boy. That is why at home [C] (even though our meals are among the shorter ones) [B] I like to sit down a little after the others, in the manner of Augustus, though I do not imitate him in leaving before the others. On the contrary: I like to stay on a

¹ [Why ‘will condemn’? Presumably because this concerns the future of the boy whose early upbringing has been under discussion.]

long time afterwards listening to the conversation, provided that I do not join it since I find it tiring and painful to talk on a full stomach, whereas I find it a very healthy and pleasant exercise to shout and argue *before* a meal. [C] The ancient Greeks and Romans had more sense than we: unless some other quite unusual task intervened, they assigned to eating (which is one of the chief activities of our lives) several hours a day and the best part of the night, eating and drinking less hastily than we, who do everything on the run; they prolonged this natural pleasure with greater leisure and enjoyment, interspersing with it various useful and pleasant social duties.

[B] Those who must take care of me could easily deprive me of what they think harmful to me, for in such matters I neither want what is not there nor notice its absence; but they are wasting their time if they lecture me on abstaining from anything that is served. So that when I resolve to diet, I have to be set apart from the other diners, and served precisely what is needed for the prescribed meal; for if I sit down at table I forget my resolution. . . .

·OLD AGE AND THE APPROACH OF DEATH·

God is merciful to those from whom he takes away life a little at a time; that is the only benefit of old age. The final death will be all the less total and painful; it will kill only a half or a quarter of a man. Look! There is a tooth of mine that has just fallen out with no pain, no effort; that was the natural end of its duration. That part of my being, as well as several other parts, are already dead; others that are half-dead include the ones that were the most energetic and uppermost in my prime. That is how I melt and slip away from myself. How stupid it would be if my mind felt the last topple of an already advanced decline as though it were the

whole collapse. I hope that won't happen.

[C] In truth, I get one principal consolation from thoughts of my death, namely that it will be right and natural, and that from now on any favour I could demand or hope for from destiny would be illegitimate. People convince themselves that in former times men weren't just taller but lived longer. Yet Solon, who belongs to those times, sets our extreme limit at 70 years. Shall I, who have in all things so greatly honoured that *excellent mean*¹ of former ages, and have taken moderation as the most perfect measure, aspire to an immoderate and prodigious old age? Anything that goes against the current of nature *may* be harmful, but what accords with it *must* always be pleasant. 'Whatever happens in accordance with nature must be counted among the good things' [Cicero]. That is why Plato says that whereas death caused by wounds and illnesses is violent, the death that ambushes us as old age leads us to it is the easiest of all and in a way delightful. 'Young men lose their lives by violence, old men by ripeness' [Cicero].

[B] Everywhere death mingles and fuses with our life: our •decline anticipates its hour, and even shoulders its way into our •rise. I have portraits of myself aged 25 and 35. I compare them with my portrait now; in how many ways is it no longer me! My present likeness is *much* more unlike them than it is unlike what I shall be like in death. It is too much an abuse of nature to drag it along so far that it has to give up on us and abandon our guidance—our eyes, our teeth, our legs and so on—to the mercy of external remedies from the •medical• art, weary of following us.

·MORE ABOUT FOOD AND DRINK·

. . . . Since my youth I have occasionally missed a meal, either •to sharpen my appetite for the next day. . . .or •to conserve

¹ [Montaigne gives it in Greek: *ariston metron*.]

my vigour for the sake of some action of body or mind

(for in me both of these grow cruelly sluggish through repletion: and I hate above everything the stupid coupling of such a healthy and vivacious goddess [Venus] with that little belching dyspeptic god [Bacchus], all bloated by the fumes of his wine);

or •to cure my sick stomach, or •for lack of appropriate company

(since I agree with Epicurus that we should care less about what we eat than about whom we eat with. . . .

No recipe is so pleasing to me, no sauce so appetizing, as those that derive from the company.)

I believe it is healthier to eat more slowly and less, and to eat more often. But I give precedence to appetite and hunger: I would take no pleasure in dragging out three or four puny meals a day, regulated as if I were taking medicine. . . . [C] Let us—especially we old men—seize the first opportunity that comes our way. Let us leave the daily diets to the almanack-makers and to the doctors.¹

[B] The greatest benefit that good health gives me is sensual pleasure; let us cling to the first pleasure that is present and known. I avoid the regularity in these dietary laws. A man who wants a regimen that serves him must not allow it to go on and on; we become hardened to it; our powers go to sleep in it; after six months you will have so degraded your stomach by it that your only 'profit' will be merely to have lost your freedom to safely depart from it. [[The mid-sentence switch from 'we' to 'you' is Montaigne's. The five occurrences of 'it' in this sentence all refer to the supposedly helpful regimen.]]

·MONTAIGNE'S MANAGEMENT OF HIS ELDERLY PHYSIQUE·

I do not keep my legs and thighs more covered in winter than in summer; silk hose. nothing else. I did allow myself to keep my head warmer to help my rheum, and my stomach warmer to help my colic [see Glossary], but within a few days my ailments grew used to this and disdained my ordinary precautions. So I escalated from a cap to a head-scarf and from a bonnet to a lined hat. The padding of my doublet now only serves as decoration: it is pointless unless I add a layer of rabbit-fur or vulture-skin, and wear a skull-cap under my hat. Pursue that escalation and you will have quite a journey! I'll do nothing of the sort, and would willingly reverse what I have already done if I dared to. Are you falling into some new ailment? That reform of yours is no longer doing you any good; you have grown used to it; look for another! This is how men are undermined when they let themselves become entangled in restricted diets and cling to them superstitiously. They need others, and then others after those; there is no end to it.

For the sake of both work and pleasure, it is far more convenient to do as the ancients did: go without lunch and, so as not to break up the day, put off the feast until the time comes to return home and rest. That is what I used to do; but I have more recently found from experience that on the contrary it is better to eat at lunchtime and that digestion is better when one is awake.

I rarely feel thirsty when I am in good health—nor when ill, though I do get a dry mouth then, yet without a thirst. Normally I drink only for the thirst that comes as I eat, far along into the meal. . . . I water my wine, sometimes half and half, sometimes one-third water. When I am home, by an

¹ Medical astrological almanacks (a legal monopoly of the medical profession) marked particular dates as propitious for certain foods, treatments and so on. [Note by Screech]

ancient practice that my father's doctor prescribed for him (and for himself), what I need is mixed in the wine-cellar two or three hours before serving. ^[C] They say that this custom of mixing wine and water was invented by Cranaus, king of the Athenians—I have heard arguments both for and against its usefulness. I think it more proper and more healthy that boys not drink any wine until they are 16 or 18. ^[B] The most current and common way of living is the finest; in my view all eccentricity is to be avoided; I would hate a German who put water in his wine as much as a Frenchman who drank it pure. The law in such things is common usage.

I am afraid of stagnant air and go in mortal fear of smoke (the first repairs I hastened to make in my place were to the chimneys and privies; defects in these are the usual flaws in old buildings, and are quite intolerable) and I count as hardships of war the thick clouds of dust that gather during a long day's ride in summer. . . .

The rigour of summer is none of an enemy to me than that of winter, for—apart from the discomfort of heat, less easily remedied than that of cold, and apart from the sun's rays beating down on my head—my eyes are affected by any dazzling light; I could not lurch now facing a bright and flaming fire. At the time when I was more in the habit of reading, I used to place a piece of glass over my book to deaden the whiteness of the paper, and I found it quite a relief. Up to now I have no acquaintance with spectacles, and can see as well at a distance as I ever did or as anyone can. It is true that towards nightfall I begin to be aware of blurring and weakness in my reading, an activity that has always strained my eyes, but especially in the evening. ^[C] That is one step backwards, though a barely noticeable one. I shall take another step back, the second followed by a third, the third by a fourth, so gently that I shall have become quite blind before I feel the decadence and old age of my eyesight.

So skilfully do the Fates untwist the thread of our life. I am similarly unwilling to admit that I am on the point of becoming hard of hearing, and you will find that when I am half-deaf I shall still be blaming it on the voices of those who are speaking to me. We must really strain our soul to make it aware of how it is ebbing away.

^[B] My walk is quick and firm, and I do not know which of the two, my mind and my body, found it harder to fix in one place. Any preacher holds my attention throughout an entire sermon is indeed a friend of mine! On solemn occasions when everyone else maintains a fixed expression and where I have seen ladies keep even their eyes still, I have never succeeded in stopping one of my limbs from jiggling about; although I am seated [*assis*] there, I am hardly settled [*rassis*] there. . . . ^[C] People could have said of me since boyhood that I had craziness in my feet, or quicksilver, so fidgety and restless they are, wherever I place them.

^[B] It is bad manners, as well as being bad for health and indeed for pleasure, to eat ravenously as I do. In my haste, I often bite my tongue and sometimes my fingers. . . . By this I lose the leisure for talking, which is such a fine seasoning at table—provided that the remarks are appropriate, pleasant, and brief.

There is jealousy and rivalry among our pleasures: they clash and interfere with each other. Alcibiades, a connoisseur of good living, banned even music from his table, lest it interfere with the sweetness of conversation, ^[C] justifying this (according to Plato) by saying that it is the practice of commonplace men to invite players and singers to their feasts since they lack the good talk. . . . with which intelligent men know how to entertain each other.

^[B] Varro asks this for a banquet: an assembly of people of handsome presence and agreeable conversation, who are neither mute nor garrulous; cleanliness and delicacy in the

food and in the place; serene weather. [C] An enjoyable dinner requires no little skill and provides no little pleasure; great war-leaders and great philosophers have been willing to learn how to arrange one. I happen to remember three such feasts that occurred during my more flourishing days, and that chanced to give me sovereign pleasure because each of the guests contributed to such sovereign delight according to the degree of good temper of body and soul he happened to have. My present condition excludes me from this.

·THE RIGHT ATTITUDE TO PLEASURES AND PAINS·

[B] I, who operate only close to the ground, hate that inhuman 'wisdom' that would make us disdainful and hostile towards the care of our bodies. I reckon that it is as injudicious to set our heart against natural pleasures as to set our heart too much on them. [C] Xerxes was a fool to offer a reward to anyone found some new pleasure for him when he was already wrapped in all human pleasure; but hardly less of a fool is the man who cuts back the pleasures that nature has found for him. [B] We should neither hunt them nor run from them; we should *accept* them. I do so with more gusto and better grace¹ and more willingly allow myself to follow a natural inclination. [C] We need not exaggerate their emptiness; that makes itself evident enough, thanks to our kill-joy mind, which disgusts us with them as well as with itself; it treats itself and everything it takes in. . . . according to its own insatiable, erratic and unstable² nature: 'If the jug is not clean, all you pour into it turns sour' [Horace].

I, who boast of embracing the pleasures of life so sedulously. . . . find virtually nothing but wind in them when I examine them in detail. But what of it? We are all wind. And the wind (wiser than we are) loves to make a noise and move about, and is content with its own role, without wanting stability or solidity, qualities that don't belong to it.

Some say that the greatest pleasures and pains are those that belong exclusively to the imagination. . . . No wonder! It shapes them to its liking and tailors them for itself out of whole cloth. Every day I see noteworthy and perhaps desirable examples of it. But I, whose constitution is composite and coarse, cannot cling to this single indivisible object so completely as to keep me from grossly pursuing. . . . present pleasures that are sensed through the understanding, understood through the senses. . . .

[This paragraph has seven switches between [B] and [C], silenced in this version.] There some who—from savage stupidity, as Aristotle says—are disgusted by bodily pleasures. I know some who do it from ambition. Why do they not also give up breathing? . . . , Why do they not reject light because it is free and costs them neither ingenuity nor effort? Just to see what happens, let Mars, Pallas or Mercury sustain them instead of Venus, Ceres and Bacchus.³ Perhaps they'll try to square the circle while perched on their wives! I hate being told to have our minds up in the clouds while our bodies are at the table. I don't want the mind to be nailed to it—i.e. to the dinner-table—or to wallow at it, but I do want it to attend to it—to sit there, not to go to sleep there.

¹ [This and the next clause require a 'than' completion; it may be 'than I ought' or 'than most people do'; take your pick.]

² ['unstable' is a poor translation of Montaigne's *versatile*, which the Robert dictionary explains as meaning 'given to easily changing opinions'; we seem to have no English word for this. All previous translators have used the English 'versatile', which is flatly wrong.]

³ That is, let them live on war (Mars), wisdom (Pallas) or eloquence (Mercury) instead of on sexual intercourse (Venus), corn (Ceres) and wine (Bacchus), the second three representing bodily 'necessities'. [Note by Screech]

Aristippus championed only the body, as if we had no soul; Zeno embraced only the soul, as if we had no body. Both were wrong. They say that Pythagoras practised a philosophy that was pure contemplation, Socrates one that was all *mœurs* and action, and that Plato found the balance between the two. But they are just making up a story; the true balance is to be found in Socrates; Plato is far more Socratic than Pythagorean, and it better becomes him.

[B] When I dance, I dance; when I sleep, I sleep; yes, and when I walk alone in a beautiful orchard, if my thoughts are occupied by other things for part of the time, for another part of the time I bring them back to the walk, to the orchard, to the sweetness of this solitude, and to myself. Nature has in a maternal fashion arranged for the actions it imposes on us as necessities also to be pleasurable, urging us towards them not only by reason but by appetite. To infringe its laws is wrong.

When I see Caesar and Alexander, in the thick of their great endeavours, so fully enjoying pleasures [C] that are natural and consequently necessary and right, [B] I do not say that this is relaxing their souls; I say, rather, that it is toughening them, employing the vigour of their spirits to make those violent occupations and burdensome thoughts take second place to the usages of everyday life. [C] ·How· wise ·they would have been· if they had believed that this was their ordinary occupation and the other one—the military one—extraordinary.

We are great fools! ‘He has spent his life in idleness’, we say. ‘I haven’t done a thing today.’—What! Have you not *lived*? That is not only the most basic of your occupations; it is the most illustrious.—‘If I had been set to manage some great affair, I would have shown what I could do.’—Have you been able to think out and manage your own life? ·Then· you have performed the greatest task of all. . . . Our duty is to

compose our *mœurs*, not to compose books; to win order and tranquillity in our conduct, not to win battles and provinces. Our great and glorious masterpiece is to live appropriately. All other things—ruling, accumulating, building—are at most little appendages and little props [*appendicules et adminicules*].

[B] I delight in coming across an army general, at the foot of a breach that he means soon to attack, giving himself wholly and freely to his dinner and his conversation, among his friends; [C] and Brutus, with heaven and earth conspiring against him and the liberty of Rome, stealing an evening hour from his rounds to read and annotate Polybius with complete composure. [B] It is for little souls, buried under the weight of business, to be unable to detach themselves from it, to leave it and pick it up again: ‘O you strong men who have often undergone worse trials with me, banish care now with wine; tomorrow we shall again sail the vast sea’ [Horace].

Whether as a joke or in earnest, ‘theological wine’ and ‘Sorbonne wine’ have become proverbial, as have their feasts; but I find that the faculty are right to dine all the more comfortably and pleasantly for having used the morning profitably and seriously in the work of their school. The awareness of having used those other hours well is a proper and savoury sauce for the dinner table. That is how the sages lived; and that inimitable straining for virtue that amazes us in both the Catos, severe to the point of rudeness, was a disposition that submitted meekly and contentedly to the laws of the human condition and of Venus and Bacchus; [C] following the precepts of their sect—the stoics—which require the perfect sage to be as expert and versed in the use of the natural pleasures as in any other duty of life: ‘To a discriminating mind let him ally a discriminating palate’ [Cicero].

[Now a couple of pages giving details about the conduct of Epaminondas, Scipio and—especially—Socrates, all de-

scribed as militarily brave and energetic while also giving time to playing with children, collecting sea-shells, writing plays, learning to dance and play musical instruments, and so on. This anecdote about Socrates is memorable: 'He put up for 27 years with hunger and poverty, with loutish sons, with a cantankerous wife and finally with calumny, tyranny, imprisonment, leg-irons and poison. Yet that very man, when the dictates of courtesy made him a guest at a drinking-match, acquitted himself better than anyone else in the army.']

·AGAINST EXTREMISM·

[B] Popular opinion is wrong. It is much easier

- to go along the margins, where the outer edge serves as a limit and a guide, than to take the wide and unhedged middle way; and
- to go by art than to go by nature.

But ·as well as being easier· it is less noble and less commendable. [C] Greatness of soul consists not so much in pressing upward and forward as in knowing how to govern and circumscribe oneself. Such a soul regards as great whatever is adequate, and shows its elevation by preferring moderate things to outstanding ones. [B] Nothing is so fine and so legitimate as playing the man well and properly; no knowledge as hard to acquire as knowledge of how to live this life well [C] and naturally. [B] And the most barbarous of our maladies is to despise our being.

If anyone wants to set his soul apart, let him have the boldness to do so (if he can) while his body is ill, to free it from contagion; at other times, on the contrary, his soul should assist and favour the body, and not refuse to participate in its natural pleasures, bringing to them (if it is wiser than the body) moderation, lest those pleasures merge into pains

through lack of discretion. [C] Lack of temperance is the bane of sensual pleasure; temperance is not its scourge but its seasoning. Eudoxus (for whom pleasure was the sovereign good) and his companions (who rated it at so high a price) savoured it in its most charming sweetness, doing this by means of temperance, which in them was outstanding and exemplary.

[B] I so order my soul that it contemplates both pain and pleasure with a gaze [C] equally self-controlled. . . .and [B] equally steady, yet looking soberly at the one and cheerfully at the other,¹ and, according to its ability, as anxious to extinguish the one as to extend the other. [C] Looking sanely on good things brings with it looking sanely on bad ones. Pain has something unavoidable in its mild beginning, and sensual pleasure has something avoidable in its excessive ending. Plato couples them together and claims that it is equally the duty of fortitude to stand against pain and to stand against the immoderate and seductive fascinations of sensual pleasure. They are two springs ·of water·; whoever draws the right amount from from the right one at the right time—whether city, man or beast—is very fortunate. We should take the first as a necessary medicine, more sparingly; and take the other to slake our thirst, though not to the point of drunkenness. Pain, pleasure, love, hatred are the first things a child feels; if when reason develops they are guided by it, that is virtue.

·TAKING WELL-BEING SERIOUSLY·

[B] I have a vocabulary all my own: I 'pass the time' when time is bad and unpleasant; when it is good, I do not want to *pass* it; I savour it, I hold onto it. We should run through the bad and settle on the good. This ordinary expression 'pastime' or 'pass the time' represents the conduct of those *wise* folk

¹ [This switches 'soberly' and 'cheerfully', to make the clause fit with the rest of the paragraph.]

who don't think they can make better use of their life than to let it slip by and escape, by-pass it, side-step it, and do their best to ignore it and run away from it, as something irksome and contemptible. But I experience life differently, and find it to be both agreeable and worth prizing, even as I grasp it now in its final waning; nature has given it into our hands adorned with such favourable conditions that we have only ourselves to blame if it weighs on us and slips uselessly from us. ^[C] 'It is the life of the fool that is graceless, fearful, and given over wholly to the future' [Seneca]. ^[B] Nevertheless, I am reconciling myself to losing my life without regret, not as troublesome and annoying but as something that by its nature must be lost. . . . It takes management to enjoy life; I enjoy it twice as much as others, because the measure of enjoyment depends on the greater or lesser *attention* that we bring to it. Especially now, when I see my *remaining* span to be so short, I want to increase its weight; I want to arrest the speed of its passing by the speed with which I grasp it, compensating for the haste of its ebb by the intensity of my use of it. The shorter my possession of life, the deeper and fuller I must make it.

•Others feel the sweetness of some satisfaction and of prosperity; I feel it too, but not in passing, as it slips by. We should study it, savour it, think it over, so as to give proper thanks to him who grants it to us. •They enjoy other pleasures as they enjoy the pleasure of sleep, without being conscious of them. . . . There was a time when I found it worthwhile to have my sleep broken into so that I could catch a glimpse of it. I deliberate with myself on any pleasure. I do not skim over it; I plumb it, and bend my reason—now grown peevish and hard to please—to accept it. Do I find myself in some tranquil state of calm? Is there some sensual pleasure that tickles me? I do not allow it to be pilfered by my senses; I bring *my soul* into it, not to implicate itself but to

enjoy itself, not to lose itself in the pleasure but to find itself. I set it to observe itself in that happy state, to weigh that happiness, gauge it and increase it. It measures how much it owes to God for being at peace with its conscience and its other internal passions, *and* for having its *associated* body in its natural state, enjoying. . . . appropriately the sweet and pleasant functions by which it pleases him, through his grace, to counterbalance the pains with which his justice in its turn chastises us; my soul gauges how precious it is to have reached a point where the sky is calm all around it: no desire, no fear or doubt disturb the air for it; nor is there any hardship—^[C] past, present or future—^[B] over which its thoughts may not pass without anxiety.

This consideration gains a great lustre when different people's conditions are compared. Accordingly, I set before myself in a thousand forms •those who are carried away and tossed about by fortune or their own errors, as well as •those who accept their good fortune with such languid unconcern. (The latter kind are closer to my own case.) They—meaning people of the former kind—really do 'pass their time': they pass beyond the present and the things they have, in favour of •slavery to hope and of •shadows and vain images that fancy dangles before them—'Like phantoms that are said to flit about after death, or dreams that delude our slumbering senses' [Virgil]—and that hasten and prolong their flight the more they are pursued. The fruit and goal of these people's pursuit is to pursue. Just as Alexander said that he worked for work's sake, 'Believing he had not done anything, while anything remained to be done' [Lucan].

[This paragraph involves eleven switches between ^[B] and ^[C], silenced in this version.] As for me, then, I love life and cultivate it as it has pleased God to grant it to us. I do not go about wishing

- that it didn't involve the need to eat and drink; . . . or
- that we could keep up our strength by merely putting

- into our mouths a little of the drug that Epimenides used to quell his appetite and keep himself alive; or
- that we could, without sensation, beget children by our fingers or our heels (but rather, speaking with due respect, that we could also do it voluptuously by our fingers and our heels!); or
 - that the body should be without desire and without titillation.

These are ungrateful and unfair complaints. I accept wholeheartedly and gratefully what nature has done for me, and I am pleased that I do and proud that I do. One does wrong to that great and almighty Giver to refuse his gift, to nullify and disfigure it. Entirely good himself, he has made everything good: 'All things that are in accordance with nature are worthy of esteem' [Cicero].¹

[B] I most willingly embrace the opinions of philosophy that are most solid, that is to say, most human, most ours; my arguments, like my *mœurs*, are lowly and humble. [C] Philosophy is very childish, to my mind, when it deploys its *ergos* to preach to us •that it is a barbarous match to marry the divine to the earthly, the rational to the irrational, the strict to the permissive, the honourable to the dishonourable; •that sensual pleasure is a bestial quality, unworthy of being enjoyed by a wise man; •that the only enjoyment the wise man gets from lying with his beautiful young wife is the pleasure of awareness that he is acting rightly—like pulling on his boots for a useful ride! May philosophy's followers bring to deflowering their wives no more right and sinews and sap than its lesson has!

That ·lesson· is not what Socrates says—philosophy's tutor and ours. He values bodily pleasure, as he should,

but he prefers pleasure of the mind, as having more force, constancy, ease, variety and dignity. And, according to him, that pleasure by no means goes alone (he is not so fanciful!); it merely has primacy. For him temperance is not the enemy of our pleasures; it moderates them.

·NATURE AS A GUIDE·

[B] Nature is a gentle guide, but no more gentle than wise and just: [C] 'We must go deeply into the nature of things and find out exactly what it demands' [Cicero]. [B] I seek its footprint everywhere; we have confused that with with the tracks of artifice, [C] which makes it hard to delimit and portray that sovereign good of the Platonists and Aristotelians, which is to *live according to nature*, and also that of the Stoics, which is a neighbour to it, namely to *consent to nature*.

[B] Is it not an error to reckon some actions to be less worthy because they are necessary? No, they will not knock it out of my head that the marriage of pleasure with necessity. . . . is a most suitable one. What are we up to when we dismember by divorce a structure woven of such close and brotherly corespondence? On the contrary, let us tie it together again by mutual services. Let the mind arouse and quicken the heaviness of the body; let the body check the lightness of the mind and anchor it. [C] 'He who praises the nature of the soul as the sovereign good and condemns the nature of the flesh as evil is fleshly both in his love of the soul and his hatred of the flesh, since his thought is based on human vanity not on divine truth' [Saint Augustine].

[B] There is no part unworthy of our care in this gift that God has given us; we are accountable for it down to a single hair. . . . [C] Commonplace intellects can be persuaded by authority alone, and it has greater weight in a foreign

¹ [In this passage, two sentences evidently about God are sandwiched between two about nature. The middle two cannot be about nature, because their nouns, adjectives and pronouns are all masculine, whereas the French *nature* is feminine.]

language! So at this point let us make another charge at it: *Stultitiae proprium quis non dixerit, ignave et contumaciter facere quae facienda sunt, et alio corpus impellere, alio animum, distrahique inter diversissimos motus?* [Seneca] ‘Who would not say that it was really foolish to do in a slothful, contumacious spirit something that has to be done anyway, thrusting the body in one direction and the soul in another where it is torn between totally conflicting emotions?’

[B] Go on then, just to see: get someone to tell you some day what pastimes and musings he puts into his head, for the sake of which he diverts his thoughts from a good meal and regrets the time he spends feeding himself. You will find that no dish on your table tastes as insipid as that fine entertainment of his soul

(it would usually do us more good to fall asleep completely than to stay awake for whatever we stay awake for)

and you will find that his arguments and concepts are not worth your stew. Even if they were the raptures of Archimedes himself, what of it? Here, I am not alluding to those venerable souls who, through ardent devotion and piety, are raised to a constant and scrupulous meditation on things divine; [C] souls who

(enjoying by the power of a quick and rapturous hope a foretaste of that everlasting food that is the ultimate goal, the final destination, that Christians long for)

scorn to linger over our beggarly, watery and ambiguous comforts, and easily assign to the body the bother and use of sensual and temporal fodder. [B] That endeavour is a privilege; and those folk are not to be confused with the scrapings of the pot that *we* are, distracted as we are by vain longings and musing. [C] Among the likes of us, two

things have always appeared to me to chime particularly well together—supercelestial opinions and subterranean *mœurs*.

[B] That great man Aesop saw his master pissing as he walked along. ‘What next?’ he said, ‘Shall we have to shit as we run?’ Let us manage our time; there will still be a great deal idle and ill spent. Our mind likes to think that it does not have enough hours to do its own business unless it dissociates itself from the body for the short time when the body really needs it.

They want to get outside themselves and escape from their humanity.¹ That is madness: instead of transforming themselves into angels they transform themselves into beasts; instead of raising themselves they lower themselves. [C] Those soaring humours frighten me, like lofty and inaccessible places; and for me nothing in the life of Socrates is so hard to stomach as his ecstasies and his daemonizings, and nothing in Plato is as human as the qualities for which he is said to have been called divine. [B] And of our branches of knowledge it is those that ascend the highest which seem to me to be the most base and earth-bound. And I find nothing so abject and so mortal in the life of Alexander as his fantasies about being immortal. [B] Philotas stung him wittily by his congratulatory answer to a letter reporting that Alexander had been placed among the gods by the oracle of Jupiter Ammon: ‘As far as you are concerned, I’m delighted,’ he said, ‘but there is reason to be sorry for the men who will have to live with and obey a man who trespasses beyond, and cannot be content with, the measure of a man.’ . . .

[B] The nice inscription by which the Athenians honoured Pompey’s visit to their city fits with what I think: ‘You are a god in so far as you recognise that you are a man’ [quoted by Plutarch].

¹ [‘They’—who? Montaigne does not say, but we get the idea as the paragraph continues.]

It is an accomplishment, absolute and as it were God-like, to be able to enjoy one's being rightfully. We seek other attributes because we do not understand the use of the ones we have; and we go outside ourselves because we do not know what is going on in there. ^[C]It's no use our getting up on stilts, for even on stilts we must still walk with our legs. And on the highest throne in the world we are still seated on our behinds.

^[B]The most beautiful of lives, to my mind, are those that

conform to the common pattern, ^[C]human and orderly, but ^[B]without miracles and without eccentricity. Old age, however, has a little need to be treated more tenderly. Let us commend it to the god [Apollo] who is the protector of health and of wisdom, but merry and companionable wisdom: 'Grant, O son of Latona, that I may enjoy the things I have prepared; and let me, with my mind intact, not degenerate into a squalid senility in which the lyre is lacking' [Horace].