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Montaigne's Essays

In Three Books. With Notes and Quotations. And an Account of The Author's Life ; With a short Character of the Author and Translator, by the late Marquis of Halifax; With the Addition of A Complete Table to each Volume

Montaigne, Michel Eyquem de

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Chap. 26. Of measuring Truth and Error.

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C H A P. XXVI.

*That it is Folly to measure Truth and Error by
our own Capacity.*

TIS not perhaps without Reason, that we attribute Facility of Belief and Easiness of Persuasion to Simplicity and Ignorance, and I have heard Belief compared to the Impression of a Seal stamp'd upon the Soul, which, by how much softer and of less Resistance it is, is the more easy to be imposed upon. *Ut necesse est lancem in libra ponderibus impositis, de primis sic animum perspicuis cedere; As the Scale of the Balance must give Way to the Weight that presses it down, so the Mind must of Necessity yield to Demonstration:* And by how much the Soul is more empty, and without Counterpoise, with so much greater Facility it dips under the Weight of the first Persuasion. And this is the Reason that Children, the common People, Women, and sick Folks, are most apt to be led by the Ears. But then, on the other Side, 'tis a very great Presumption, to slight and condemn all Things for false that do not appear to us likely to be true; which is the ordinary Vice of such as fancy themselves wiser than their Neighbours. I was myself once one of those; and if I heard Talk of dead Folks walking, of Prophecies, Enchantments, Witchcraft, or any other Story, I had no Mind to believe,

*Somnia, terrores magicos, miracula, sagas,
Nocturnos lemures, portentaque Thessala.*

Dreams, magick Terrors, Wonders, Sorceries,
Hobgoblins, or *Thessalian* Prodigies.

I presently pitied the poor People that were abused by these Follies; whereas I now find, that I myself was to be pitied as much at least as they; not that Experience has taught me any Thing to convince my former Opinion, though my Curiosity has endeavoured that Way; but Reason has instructed me, that thus resolutely to condemn any Thing for false and impossible,

impossible, is arrogantly and impiously to circumscribe and limit the Will of God, and the Power of Nature, within the Bounds of my own Capacity, than which no Folly can be greater. If we give the Names of Monster and Miracle to every Thing our Reason cannot comprehend, how many are continually presented before our Eyes? Let us but consider through what Clouds, and as it were groping in the Dark, our Teachers lead us to the Knowledge of most of the Things we apply our Studies to, and we shall find that it is rather Custom than Knowledge that takes away the Wonder, and renders them easy and familiar to us.

— *Jam nemo cessus saturusque videndi,
Susplicere in Cæli dignatur lucida Tempa* *.

Already glutted with the Sight, now none
Heaven's lucid Temples deigns to look upon.

And that if those Things were now newly presented to us, we should think them as strange and incredible, if not more than any others.

— *Si nunc primum mortalibus adsint
Ex improviso, seu sint objecta repente,
Nil magis his rebus poterat mirabile dici,
Aut minus ante quod auderent fore credere gentes* †.

Where Things are suddenly, and by Surprise
Just now objected new to mortal Eyes,
At nothing could they be astonish'd more,
Nor less than what they so admir'd before.

He that had never seen a River, imagined the first he met with to be the Sea, and the greatest Things that have fallen within our Knowledge, we conclude the Extremes that Nature makes of the Kind.

*Scilicet & fluvius qui non est maximus, ei est
Qui non ante aliquem majorem vidit & ingens;
Arbor homoque videtur, & omnia de genere omni
Maxime quæ vidit quisque, hæc ingentia fingit* ‡.

A little River unto him does seem,
That bigger never saw, a mighty Stream :

* *Lucret. l. 2.* † *Id. Ibid.* ‡ *Id. Ibid.*

A Tree,

A Tree, a Man ; any Thing seems to his View
O'th' Kind the greatest, that ne'er greater knew.

Consuetudine Oculorum, affuescunt animi, neque admirantur, neque requirunt rationes earum rerum, quas semper vident *. Things grow familiar to Men's Minds by being often seen ; so that they neither admire, nor are inquisitive into Things they daily see. The Novelty, rather than the Greatness of Things, tempts us to enquire into their Causes. But we are to judge with more Reverence, and with greater Acknowledgment of our own Ignorance and Infirmary of this infinite Power of Nature. How many unlikely Things are there testified by People of very good Repute, which if we cannot persuade ourselves absolutely to believe, we ought at least to leave them in Suspence? For, to conclude them impossible, is by a temerarious Presumption to pretend to know the utmost Bounds of Possibility. Did we rightly understand the Difference betwixt impossible, betwixt extraordinary, and what is contrary to the common Opinion of Men, in believing rashly, and on the other Side, in being not too incredulous, we should then observe the Rule of *Ne quid nimis*, enjoined by *Chilo*. When we find in *Froissard*, that the *Count de Foix* knew in *Bearn* the Defeat of *John King of Castile*, at *Juberoth*, the next Day after, and the Means by which he tells us he came to do so, we may be allowed to be a little merry at it, as also at what our Annals report, that Pope *Honorius*, the same Day that King *Philip Augustus* died at *Mant* — performed his publick Obsequies at *Rome*, and commanded the like throughout all *Italy* ; the Testimony of these Authors not being perhaps of Authority enough to restrain us. But what if *Plutarch*, besides several Examples that he produces out of Antiquity, tells us, he is assured by certain Knowledge, that in the Time of *Domitian*, the News of the Battle lost by *Antonius* in *Germany*, was published at *Rome*, many Days Journey from thence, and dispersed throughout the whole World, the same Day it was fought : And if *Cæsar* was of Opinion, that it has often happened, that the Report has preceded the Accident ; shall we not say, that these simple

* *Cicero de Nat. Deor. lib. 2.*

People have suffered themselves to be deceived with the Vulgar, for not having been so clear-sighted as we? Is there any Thing more delicate, more clear, more sprightly than *Pliny's* Judgment, when he is pleased to set it to work? Any Thing more remote from Vanity? Setting aside his Learning, of which I make less Account, in which of these do any of us excel him? And yet there is scarce a puiſne Sophiſter that does not convince him of Untruth, and that pretends not to inſtruct him in the Progreſs of the Works of Nature: When we read in *Bouchet* the Miracles of *St. Hilary's* Relicks; away with it, his Authority is not ſufficient to bear us the Liberty of contradicting him: But generally to condemn all ſuch like Stories, ſeems to me an Impudence of the worſt Character. The great *St. Auguſtine* profeſſes himſelf to have ſeen a blind Child recover Sight upon the Relick of *St. Gervafe*; and *St. Protafus* at *Milan*, a Woman at *Carthage* cured of a Cancer, by the Sign of a Croſs made upon her by a Woman newly baptized; *Heſperius*, a familiar Friend of his, to have driven away the Spirits that haunted his Houſe, with a little Earth of the Sepulchre of our Lord; which Earth being alſo tranſported thence into the Church, a Paralytick to have there been ſuddenly cured by it; a Woman in Proceſſion, having touched *St. Stephen's* Shrine with a Noſegay, and after rubbing her Eyes with it, to have recovered her Sight loſt many Years before; with ſeveral other Miracles, of which he profeſſes himſelf to have been an Eye-Witneſs. Of what ſhall we accuſe him and the two holy Biſhops, *Aurelius* and *Maximinus*, both which he atteſts to the Truth of theſe Things? Shall it be of Ignorance, Simplicity, and Facility; or of Malice or Impoſture? Is any Man now living ſo impudent, as to think himſelf comparable to them, either in *Virtue*, *Piety*, *Learning*, *Judgment*, or any Kind of Perfection? *Qui ut Rationem nullam afferent, ipſa Autoritate me frangerent* *. Who, though they ſhould give me no Reason for what they affirm, would yet convince me with their Authority. 'Tis a Preſumption of great Danger and Conſequence, beſides the abſurd Temerity it draws after it, to contemn what we do not comprehend. For after that, according to your ſine

* *Cicero 2, de Div. l. 2.*

Understanding, you have establish'd the Limits of Truth and Error, and that afterwards there appears a Necessity upon you of believing stranger Things than those you have contradicted, you are already oblig'd to quit your Hold, and to acquiesce. That which seems to me so much to disorder our Consciences in the Commotions we are now in concerning Religion, is the Catholicks dispensing so much with their Belief; they fancy they appear moderate and wise, when they grant to the *Huguenots* some of the Articles in Question; but besides that, they do not discern what Advantage it is to those with whom we contend, to begin to give Ground, and to retire, and how much this animates our Enemy to follow his Blow: These Articles which they insist upon as Things indifferent, are sometimes of very great Importance, and dangerous Consequence. We are either wholly and absolutely to submit ourselves to the Authority of our ecclesiastical Polity, or totally throw off all Obedience to it. 'Tis not for us to determine what and how much Obedience we owe to it, and this I can say, as having myself made Trial of it, that having formerly taken the Liberty of my own Swing and Fancy, and omitted or neglected certain Rules of the Discipline of our Church, which seem'd to me vain, and of no Foundation; coming afterwards to discourse it with learned Men, I have found those very Things to be built upon very good and solid Ground, and strong Foundation; and that nothing but Brutality and Ignorance make us receive them with less Reverence than the rest: Why do we not consider what Contradictions we find in our own Judgments, how many Things were Yesterday Articles of our Faith, that To-day appear no other than Fables? Glory and Curiosity are the Scourges of the Soul; of which, the last prompts us to thrust our Noses into every Thing, and the other forbids us to leave any Thing doubtful and undecided.