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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. 6. Use makes Perfectness.

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that he had taken from her Children the little Milk she had left to nourish them withal, the Army having consum'd all the rest; but of this, Proof there was none. The General, after having caution'd the Woman to take good heed to what she said, for that she would make herself guilty of a false Accusation, and should suffer the Punishment due to it if she told a Lie; but she persisting, he presently caus'd the Soldier's Belly to be ript up, to clear the Truth of the Fact, and the Woman was found to be in the right. An instructive Sentence.



C H A P. VI.

Use makes Perfection.

TIS not to be expected, that Argument and Instruction, tho' we never so voluntarily surrender our Belief to them, should be powerful enough to lead us on so far as to Action, if we do not over and above exercise and form the Soul by Experience to the Course for which we design it: It will otherwise doubtless find itself at a Loss, when it comes to the Pinch of the Business. This is the reason, why those amongst the Philosophers, who were ambitious to attain to a greater Excellence, were not contented to expect the Severities of Fortune in their Retirement, and the Repose of their own Habitations, lest she should have surpriz'd them raw and unexpert in the Combat; but sally'd out to meet her, and purposely threw themselves into the Proof of Difficulties. Some of whom abandon'd Riches to exercise themselves in a voluntary Poverty: Others have sought out Labour, and an Austerity of Life, to inure themselves to Hardships and Inconveniences; others have depriv'd themselves of their dearest Members; as of their Eyes, and Instruments of Generation, lest their too delightful and effeminate Service should soften and debauch the Stability of their Souls. But in Dying, which is the greatest Work we have to do, Practice is out of Doors, and can give us no Assistance at all. A Man may

may by Custom fortify himself against Pains, Shame, Necessity, and such like Accidents; but as to Death, we can experience it but once, and are all Apprentices when we come to it. There have anciently been Men such excellent Managers of their Time, that they have try'd even in Death itself, to relish and taste it, and who have bent their utmost Faculties of Mind to discover what this Passage is: But they are none of them come back to give an Account of it.

——— *Nemo expergitus extat
Frigida quem semel est vitai pausa sequuta* *.

——— No one was ever known to wake,
Who once in Death's cold Arms a Nap did take.

Canius Julius, a noble Roman, of singular Constancy and Virtue, having been condemn'd to die by that inhuman Monster *Caligula*, besides many admirable Testimonies that he gave of his Resolution, as he was just going to receive the Stroke of the Executioner, was ask'd by a Philosopher, a Friend of his! *Well, Canius*, said he, *whereabout is your Soul now? What is she doing? What are you thinking of? I was thinking*, reply'd the other, *to keep myself ready and the Faculties of my Mind settled and fix'd, to try if in this short and quick instant of Death, I could perceive the Motion of the Soul when she parts from the Body and whether she has any Resentment at the Separation, that I may after come again if I can to acquaint my Friends with it.* This Man Philosophizes not unto Death only, but in Death itself. What a strange Assurance was this, and what Loftiness of Courage to desire his Death should be a Lesson to him, and to have Leisure to think of other Things in so great an Affair.

——— *Jus hoc animi morientis habebas* †.

This mighty pow'r of Mind he Dying had.

And yet I fancy there is a certain Way of making it familiar to us, and in some sort, of making Tryal what it is. We may gain Experience, if not intire and perfect, yet such, at least, as shall not be totally usefess to us; and that

* *Lucret. lib. 3.*

† *Luc. lib 8.*

may render us more assured. If we cannot overtake it, we may approach it, and view it; and if we do not advance so far as to the Fort, we may at least discover it, and make ourselves perfect in the Avenues. It is not without Reason

*Sleep the
Image of
Death.*

that we are taught to consider Sleep as a Resemblance of Death; with how great Facility do we pass from Waking to Sleeping, and with how little Concern do we lose the Knowledge of Light, and of ourselves! Perhaps the Faculty of Sleeping would seem useless and contrary to Nature, since it deprives us of all Action and Sense, were it not that by it Nature instructs us, that she has equally made us to die as to live, and from Life presents us the Eternal Estate she reserves for us after it, to accustom us to it, and to take from us the Fear of it. But such as have by some violent Accident fallen into a Swoon, and in it have lost all Sense; these, methinks, have been very near seeing the true and natural Face of Death; for as to the Moment of the Passage, it is not to be feared that it brings with it any Pain or Displeasure, forasmuch as we can have no Feeling without Leisure; our Sufferings require Time, which in Death is so short and precipitous, that it must necessarily be insensible. They are the Approaches that we are to fear, and those may fall within the Limits of Experience. Many Things seem greater by Imagination than they are in Effect. I have pass'd a good Part of my Age in a perfect and entire Health; I say, not only entire, but moreover spritely and wanton. This, so full of Verdure, Jollity and Vigour, made the Consideration of Sickness so horrible to me, that when I came to experience it, I found the Attacks faint and easy, in comparison of what I had feared. Of this I have daily Experience; if I am under the Shelter of a warm Room in a stormy and tempestuous Night, I wonder how People can live abroad, and am afflicted for those who are out in the Field: If I am there myself, I do not wish to be any where else. This one Thing of being always shut up in a Chamber, I fancied insupportable: But I was presently inur'd to be so imprison'd a Week, nay, a Month together: and have found, that in the Time of my Health I did much more lament the Sick than I think myself to be lamented when I am so, and that the Force of my Imagination enhances near one Half of the Essence and Reality

lity

lity of the Thing. I hope, that when I come to die I shall find the same, and that I shall not find it worth the Pains I take, so much Preparation, and so much Assistance as I call in to undergo the Stroke. But at all Hazards, we cannot give ourselves too much Advantage.

In the Time of our Third, or Second Troubles, (I do not well remember which) going one Day abroad to take the Air, about a League from my own House, which is seated in the very Center of the Scene of all the Bustle and Mischief of the late Civil Wars of *France*, thinking myself in all Security, and so near to my Retreat, that I stood in need of no better Equipage, I had taken a Horse that went very easy upon his Pace, but was not very strong. Being upon my Return Home, a sudden Occasion falling out to make use of this Horse in a Kind of Service that he was not acquainted with; one of my Train, a lusty proper Fellow, mounted upon a strong *German* Horse, that had a very ill Mouth, but was otherwise vigorous and unfoil'd, to play the *Bravo*, and appear a better Man than his Fellows, comes thundering full Speed in the very Track where I was, rushing like a *Colossus* upon the little Man, and the little Horse, with such a Career of Strength and Weight, that he turn'd us both over and over topsy-turvy, with our Heels in the Air: So that there lay the Horse overthrown and stun'd with the Fall, and I ten or twelve Paces from him stretch'd out at Length, with my Face all batter'd and broken, my Sword, which I had in my Hand, above ten Paces beyond me, and my Belt broke all to Pieces, without any more Motion or Sense than a Stock. 'Twas the only Swoon I was ever in 'till this Hour in my Life. Those who were with me, after having used all the Means they could to bring me to myself, concluding me dead, took me up in their Arms, and carry'd me, with very much Difficulty, home to my House, which was about half a *French* League from thence. Having been by the Way, and two long Hours after, given over for a dead Man, I began to move and fetch my Breath, for so great abundance of Blood was fallen into my Stomach, that Nature had need to rouse her Forces to discharge it. They then rais'd me upon my Feet, where I threw off a great Quantity of pure florid Blood, as I had also done several Times by the Way, which gave me so much Ease, that I began to recover a little Life,

but

but leifurely, and by fo small Advances, that my firft Sentiments were much nearer the Approaches of Death than Life.

*Perche dubbiofa anchor del fuo ritorna
Nons' afficura attonita la mente **

Because the Soul her Mansion half had quit,
And was not fure ſhe was return'd to it.

The Remembrance of this miſchievous Accident, which is very well imprinted in my Memory, fo naturally repreſenting to me the Image and Idea of Death, has in ſome fort reconcil'd me to the Accident itſelf. When I firſt began to open my Eyes after my Trance, it was with fo perplex'd, fo weak and dead a Sight, that I could yet diſtinguiſh nothing, and could only diſcern the Light.

—Come quel ch'or apre, or chiude
Gli occhi, mezzo tra'l ſonne è l' eſſor deſto †.

As People in the Morning when they riſe
'Twiſt Sleep and Wake, open and ſhut their Eyes.

As to the Functions of the Soul, they advanc'd with the ſame Pace and Meaſure with thoſe of the Body. I ſaw myſelf all bloody, my Doublet being ſtain'd and ſpotted all over with the Blood I had vomited; and the firſt Thought that came into my Mind, was, that I had a Croſs-Bow ſhot in my Head; and indeed at the ſame time there were a great many made round about us. Methought my Life but juſt hung upon my Lips, and I ſhut my Eyes, to help, methought, to thruſt it out; and took a Pleaſure in languiſhing and letting myſelf go. It was an Imagination that only ſuperficially floated upon my Soul, as tender and weak as all the reſt; but really, not only exempt from Pain, but mixt with that Sweetneſs and Pleaſure that People are ſenſible of when they indulge themſelves to drop into a Slumber. I believe it is the very ſame Condition thoſe People are in, whom we ſee ſwoon with Weakneſs, in the Agony of Death, and am of Opinion, that we lament them without Cauſe, ſuppoſing them agitated with grievous Dolours, or that their Souls ſuffer under painful Thoughts. It has

* *Taſſo Can. 12.*

† *Ibid. Can. 8.*

ever been my Belief, contrary to the Opinion of many, and particularly of *Stephen Boetius*, that those whom we see so subdued and stupified at the Approaches of their End, or deprest with the Length of the Disease, or by Accident of an Apoplexy, or Falling Sickness.

——— (*Vi morbi sæpe coactus
Ante oculos aliquis nostros ut fulminis ictu
Concidit & spumas agit, ingemit, & tremit artus,
Desipit, extentat nervos, torquetur, anhelat,
Inconstanter & in jactando membra fatigat* *.)

(By the Disease compell'd, so we see some, As they were Thunder-struck, fall, groan and foam, Tremble, stretch, writhe, breath short, untill at Length, In various Strugglings they tire out their Strength.)

Or hurt in the Head, whom we hear to mutter, and by Fits to give grievous Groans; tho' we gather from thence some Sign by which it seems as if they had some Remains of Sense and Knowledge. I have always believ'd, I say, both the Body and the Soul benumb'd and asleep.

Vivit & est vitæ nescius ipse suæ †.

He lives, but does not know
That he does so.

And could not believe, that in so great a Stupefaction of the Members, and so great a Defection of the Senses, the Soul could maintain any Force within, to take cognizance of herself, or look into her own Condition, and that therefore they had no tormenting Reflections to make them consider and be sensible of the Misery of their Condition, and consequently were not much to be lamented. I can, for my Part, think of no State so insupportable and dreadful, as to have the Soul spritely and afflicted without Means to declare itself: As one should say of such who are sent to Execution, with their Tongues first cut out; were it not, that in this Kind of Dying the most Silent seems to me the most Graceful, if accompany'd with a grave and constant Countenance; or of those miserable Prisoners, who fall into the Hands of the base bloody Soldiers of this Age, by

* *Lucret. lib. 3.* † *Ovid Trist. lib. 1. Eleg. 3.*

whom they are tormented with all Sorts of inhuman Usage, to compel them to some excessive and impossible Ransom, kept in the mean Time in such Condition and Place, where they have no Means of expressing or signifying their Mind and Misery to such as they may expect should relieve them. The Poets have feign'd some Gods, who favour the Deliverance of such as suffer under a languishing Death.

————— *Hunc ego Diti*
Sacrum jussu fero, teque isto corpore solvo *.

I by Command offer to *Pluto* this,
And from that Body do the Soul dismiss.

Both the interrupted Words, and the short and irregular Answers one gets from them sometimes, by bawling and keeping a Clutter about them; or the Motions which seem to yield some Consent to what we would have them do, are no Testimony nevertheless that they live an intire Life at least. So it happens, that in the Yawning of Sleep, before it has fully possess'd us, to perceive, as in a Dream, what is done about us, and to follow the last Things are said with a perplex'd and uncertain Hearing, which seem but to touch upon the Borders of the Soul; and make Answers to the last Words have been spoken to us, which have more in them of Fortune than Sense. Now seeing I have effectually tried it, I make no doubt but I have hitherto made a right Judgment. For first, being in a Swoon, I laboured with both Hands to rip open the Buttons of my Doublet (for I was without Arms) and yet I felt nothing in my Imagination that hurt me; for we have many Motions in us that do not proceed from our Direction,

Semianimesque micant digiti, ferrumque retractant.

And half dead Fingers grope about and feel,
To grasp again the late abandon'd Steel.

So falling People extend their Arms before them by a natural Impulse, which prompts them to Offices and Motions, without any Commission from us.

* *Eneid. lib. 4.*

*Falciferos memorant currus abscindere membra,
Ut tremere in terra videatur ab artibus, id quod
Decidit abscissum, cum mens tamen atque homines vis.
Mobilitate mali non quid sentire dolorem *.*

How Limbs Syth-bearing Chariots lopt, they tell,
Would move and tremble on the Ground they fell,
When he himself from whom the Limb was ta'en,
Could by the Swiftnes feel no kind of Pain.

My Stomach was so oppress'd with the coagulated Blood, that my Hands moved to that Part of their own voluntary Motion, as they frequently do to the Part that itches, without being directed by our Will. There are several Animals, and even Men, in whom one may perceive the Muscles to stir and tremble after they are dead. Every one experimentally knows, that there are some Members which grow stiff and flag without his Leave. Now these Passions which only touch the outward Bark of us, as a Man may say, cannot be said to be ours: To make them so, there must be a Concurrence of the whole Man; and the Pains which are felt by the Hand or the Foot, while we are sleeping, are none of ours. As I drew near my own House, where the Alarm of my Fall was already got before me, with the Alarm usual in such Cases; I did not only make some little Answer to a few Questions that were asked me, but they moreover tell me, that I had so much Sense, as to order, that a Horse I saw trip and falter in the Way, which is mountainous and uneasy, should be given to my Wife. This Consideration should seem to proceed from a Soul that retain'd its Function, but it was nothing so with me. I knew not what I said or did, and they were nothing but idle Thoughts in the Clouds, that were stir'd up by the Senses of the Eyes and Ears, and proceeded not from me. I knew not for all that whence I came from, or whither I went, neither was I capable to weigh and consider what was said to me: These were light Effects that the Senses produced of themselves, as of Custom; what the Soul contributed was in a Dream, as being lightly toucht, lick'd and bedew'd by the soft Impression of the Senses.

* *Lucret. lib 3.*

Notwithstanding, my Condition was, in Truth, very easy and quiet; I had no Afflictions upon me, either for others or myself. It was an extreme Drooping and Weakness without any Manner of Pain. I saw my own House, but knew it not. When they had put me to Bed, I found an inexpressible Sweetness in that Repose; for I had been most wretchedly tugg'd and jolted by those poor People, who had taken the Pains to carry me upon their Arms a very great and a very ill Way, and had in doing so all quite tir'd out themselves twice or thrice one after another. They offer'd me several Remedies, but I would take none, certainly believing that I was mortally wounded in the Head. And in earnest, it had been a very happy Death; for the Weakness of my Understanding depriv'd me of the Faculty of Discerning, and that of my Body from the Sense of Feeling. I suffer'd myself to glide away so sweetly, and after so soft and easy a Manner, that I scarce find any other Action less troublesome than that was. But when I came again to myself, and to re-assume my Faculties,

Ut tandem sensus convaluere mei *.

As my lost Senses did again return.

which was two or three Hours after, I felt myself on a sudden involved in a terrible Pain, having my Limbs shatter'd and ground to Pieces with my Fall, and was so exceedingly ill two or three Nights after, that I thought once more to die again, but a more painful Death, having concluded myself as good as dead before, and to this Hour am sensible of the Bruises of that terrible Shock. I will not here omit, that the last Thing I could make them beat into my Head, was the Memory of this Accident, and made it be over and over again repeated to me whither I was going, from whence I came, and at what Time of the Day this Mischance besel me, before I could comprehend it. As to the Manner of my Fall, that was conceal'd from me, in Favour to him who had been the Occasion, and other Flimflams were invented to palliate the Truth. But a long Time after, and the very next Day that my Memory began to return and represent to me the State wherein I was, at the

* *Ovid. Trist. lib. 1 El. 3.*

Instant that I perceiv'd this Horfe coming full drive upon me (for I had seen him come thundering at my Heels, and gave myself for gone: But this Thought had been so sudden, that Fear had no Leisure to introduce itself) it seem'd to me like a Flash of Lightning that had pierc'd thro' my Soul, and that I came from the other World.

This long Story of so light an Accident, would appear vain enough, were it not for the Knowledge I have gain'd by it for my own Use; for I do really find, that to be acquainted with Death, is no more but nearly to approach it. *Every one, as Pliny says, is a good Doctor to himself, provided he be capable of discovering himself near at hand.* This is not my Doctrine, 'tis my Study; and is not the Lesson of another, but my own, and yet if I communicate it, it ought not to be ill taken. That which is of use to me, may also, perhaps, be usefull to another. As to the rest, I spoil nothing, I make use of nothing but my own, and if I play the Fool, 'tis at my own Expence, and no body else is concern'd in it: For 'tis a Folly that will die with me, and that no one is to inherit. We hear but of two or three of the Ancients, who have beaten this Road, and yet I cannot say, if it be after this Manner, knowing no more of them but their Names. Not one since has follow'd the Track: 'Tis a ticklish Subject, and more nice than it seems, to follow a Pace so extravagant and uncertain, as that of the Soul: To penetrate the dark Profundities of her intricate internal Windings; to chuse and lay hold of so many little Graces and nimble Motions, is a new and extraordinary Undertaking, which withdraws us from the common and most recommended Employments of the World. 'Tis now many Years since, that my Thoughts have had no other Aim and Level, than myself, and that I have only pry'd into and study'd myself: Or if I study any other Thing, 'tis to lay it up for, and to apply it to myself. And yet I do not think it a Fault, if, as others do, by much less profitable Sciences, I communicate what I have learnt in this Affair; tho' I am not very well pleas'd with what I have writ upon this Subject. There is no Description so difficult, nor doubtless of so great Utility, as that of one's Self. And withal a Man must curl, set out, and adjust himself to appear in publick. Now I am perpetually setting off myself, for I am eternally

upon my own Description. Custom has made all speaking of a Man's self vicious, and forbids positively it, in Hatred to the Vanity, that seems inseparably join'd with the Testimony Men give of themselves. But tho' it should be true, that to entertain People with Discourses of ourselves, must of necessity be a piece of Presumption, yet I ought not, according to my general Plan, to forbear an Action that publishes this Infirmity, since it is in me; nor conceal a Fault which I not only practise but profess. Nevertheless, to speak my Mind freely of the Matter, I think that the Custom of condemning Wine, because some People will be drunk, is itself to be condemn'd. A Man cannot abuse any Thing but what is good in itself; and I believe that this Rule has only regard to the Popular Vice; it is a Bridle for Calves, by which neither Saints, whom we hear speak so highly of themselves, nor the Philosophers, nor the Divines, will be curb'd: Neither will I, who am as little the one as the other, Of what does *Socrates* treat more largely, than of himself? To what does he more direct, and address the Discourses of his Disciples, than to speak of themselves, not of the Lesson in their Book, but of the Essence and Motion of their Souls? We confess ourselves Religiously to God and our Confessor; and, as they are our Neighbours, to all the People. But some will answer and say, *That we there speak nothing but Accusation against ourselves*: Why then we say all, for our very Virtue itself is faulty and repentable; my Trade and Art is to live. He that forbids me to speak according to my own Sense, Experience, and Practice, may as well enjoin an Architect not to speak of Building according to his own Knowledge, but according to that of his Neighbour; according to the Knowledge of another, and not according to his own. If it be Vain-glory for a Man to publish his own Virtues, why does not *Cicero* prefer the Eloquence of *Hortensius*, and *Hortensius* that of *Cicero*? Perhaps, they mean, that I should give Testimony of myself by Works and Effects, not barely by Words: I chiefly paint my Thoughts, an Inform Subject, and incapable of Operative Production. 'Tis all that I can do to couch it in this airy Body of the Voice. The wisest and devoutest Men have liv'd in the greatest Care to avoid all discovery of Works: Effects would speak more of Fortune, than of me. They
manifest

manifest their own Office, and not mine; but uncertainly, and by Conjecture. They are but Patterns of some one particular Virtue. I expose myself entire: 'Tis a Skeleton, where, at one View, the Veins, Muscles, and Tendons, are apparent, each of them in its proper Place. I do not write my own Acts, but my Self and my Essence: I am of Opinion, that a Man must be very wise to value himself, and equally conscientious to give a true Report, be it better or worse, indifferently: If I thought myself perfectly good and wise, I would speak with open Mouth, and rattle it out to some Purpose. To speak less of a Man's Self than what one really is, is Folly, not Modesty; and to take that for current Pay which is under a Man's Value, is Pusillanimity and Cowardice, according to *Aristotle*. No Virtue assists itself with Falshood: Truth is never the Master of Error: To speak more of one's Self than is really true, is not always Presumption 'tis moreover very often Folly: To be immeasurably pleas'd with what one is, and to fall into an indiscreet Self-love, is, to do quite contrary to what these People direct, who, in forbidding them to speak of themselves, do consequently at the same Time interdict thinking of themselves. Pride dwells in the Thought, the Tongue can have but very little Share in it: They fancy, that to think of one's Self, is to be delighted with himself; to frequent, and to converse with a Man's Self, to be over indulgent. But this Excess springs only from those who only take a superficial View of themselves, and dedicate their main Inspection to their Affairs; that call Meditation, Raving and Idleness, looking upon themselves as a Third Person only, and a Stranger. If any one is charm'd with his own Knowledge, whilst he looks only on those below him, let him but turn his Eye upward toward past Ages, and his Pride will be abated, when he shall there find so many thousand Wits that trample him under Foot. If he enter into a flattering Vanity of his Personal Valour, let him but recollect the Lives of *Scipio*, *Epaminondas*, so many Armies and Nations that leave him so far behind them, and he will be cur'd of his Self-opinion. No particular Quality can make any Man proud, that will at the same Time put so many other weak and imperfect ones as he has in him in the other Scale, and the Nothingness of human Condition to balance the Weight: Because *Socrates* had alone swallow'd

to purpose the Precept of his God, *To know himself*; and by that Study was arriv'd to the Perfection of setting himself at nought, he was only reputed worthy the Title of a *Sage*. Whosoever shall so know himself, let him boldly speak it out.



C H A P. VII.

Of Recompences of Honour.

THOSE who write the Life of *Augustus Cæsar*, observe this in his Military Discipline, that he was wonderfully liberal of Gifts to Men of Merit; but that as to the true Recompences of Honour, he was altogether as sparing. So it is, that he had himself been gratify'd by his Uncle, with all the Military Recompences before he had ever been in the Field. It was a pretty Invention, and receiv'd into most Governments of the World, to institute certain vain and insignificant Distinctions to honour and recompence Virtue; such are the Crowns of Laurel, Oak, and Myrtle, the particular Fashion of some Garment; the Privilege to ride in a Coach in the City, or to have a Torch by Night; some peculiar Place assign'd in Publick Assemblies; the Prerogative of certain additional Names and Titles; certain Distinctions in their bearing of Coats of Arms, and the like: The Use of which, according to the several Humours of Nations, has been variously receiv'd, and do yet continue. We in *France*, as also several of our Neighbours, have the Orders of Knighthood, that are instituted only for this End. And it is, indeed, a very good and profitable Custom to find out an Acknowledgment for the Worth of excellent and extraordinary Men; and to satisfy their Ambition with Rewards that are not at all chargeable either to Prince or People: And what has been always found both by ancient Experience, and which we ourselves may also have observ'd in our own Times, that Men of Quality have ever been

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