

17. On presumption

[Montaigne moves straight from glory to vainglory. Presumption is a mark of vainglory and of vicious self-love (philautia, as it was called): so Montaigne describes himself honestly, without that blindness to his faults or distortion of home-truths associated with self-love. His self-portrait, with all its honesty, is associated (as was Du Bellay's in the *Regrets*), with the Latin satirists, the father of whom was Lucilius. Through knowledge of himself Montaigne sought also a wider knowledge of Man.]

[A] There is another kind of 'glory': the over-high opinion we conceive of our own worth. It is an imprudent affection by which we hold our own self dear, presenting ourself to ourself other than we are, just as passionate love lends grace and beauty to the person it embraces and leads to those who are enraptured by it being disturbed and confused in their judgement, so finding their Beloved other than she is, and more perfect.

Now I have no wish that a man should underestimate himself for fear of erring in this direction, nor that he should think he is worth less than he is. In all matters our judgement must maintain its rights. It is reasonable that, in this as in any other matter, it should perceive whatever truth presents it with. If he is Caesar, then let him frankly acknowledge that he is the greatest Captain in all the world. We are nothing but etiquette. We are carried away by it and neglect the substance; we cling to branches and let go of trunk and body. We have taught ladies to blush at the mere mention of something which they do not have the slightest fear of doing. We dare not call our private parts by their proper names yet are not afraid to use them for all sorts of debauchery. Etiquette forbids us from expressing in words things which are licit and natural: and we believe it. Reason forbids us to do things which are bad and illicit: and nobody believes it. Here I find myself bogged down in the laws of etiquette, which do not allow a man to speak well of himself nor ill of himself. I shall put all that aside for a while.

People whom Fortune (good or bad, whichever you want to call it) has caused to live their lives in some exalted position or other bear witness to themselves by their public deeds; but those whom Fortune has set to work merely among the crowd [C] and whom no one would ever talk about

If they did not talk about themselves, [A] can be excused if they do indeed dare to talk about themselves for the sake of those who have an interest in getting to know them, following the example of Lucilius:

*Ille velut fidis arcana sodalibus olim
Credebat libris, neque, si male cesserat, usquam
Decurrens alio, neque si bene: quo fit ut omnis
Votiva pateat veluti descripta tabella
Vita senis.*

[He used to confide his secrets to his books as to trusted companions; he never turned anywhere else, whether things went well or ill; so that when he was old his entire life lay revealed as though written down on votive tablets.]

Lucilius committed to paper his deeds and his thoughts and portrayed himself as he knew himself to be. [C] '*Nec id Rutilio et Scauro citra fidem aut obtreactioni fuit.*' [Neither were Rutilius and Scaurus disbelieved nor vilified for doing so.]¹

[A] I can remember, then, that from my tenderest childhood people noticed in me some indefinable way of holding myself and some gestures which bore witness to a sort of vain silly pride. But first of all I would like to say this: it is not inappropriate that we should have some characteristics and propensities so proper to us and so physically part of us that we ourselves have no means of being aware of them nor of recognizing them; and such innate dispositions produce, without our knowledge or consent, a kind of bodily quirk. It was a certain mannerism appropriate to their beauty that made the head of Alexander lean a little to one side and Alcibiades to speak with a slight lisp; Julius Caesar used to scratch his head with his finger – which is the comportment of a man overflowing with troublesome thoughts; and Cicero, I seem to recall, used to wrinkle his nose – which signifies an innate tendency to mockery. Such gestures can root themselves in us imperceptibly.

There are also other gestures which are cultivated – and I am certainly not talking about them – such as bowing to people and ways of greeting them, by which we acquire, as often as not wrongly, the honour of being thought humble and courteous: [C] you can be humble out of pride! [B] I am fairly lavish with raising my hat, especially in summer, and I never receive such a greeting without returning it whatever the social status of the man may be, unless I pay his wages. I could wish that some princes whom I know were more sparing and discriminating over this, for

1. Horace, *Satires*, II, 1, 30–4; Tacitus, *Agricola*, 1.

such gestures lose all meaning when they are spread about without distinction. If they are made with no regard for status they are without effect.

Among odder affectations [A] let us not overlook the haughty mien of Constantius (the Emperor) who always held his head quite straight in public, neither turning it to right or left nor inclining it even to acknowledge those who were bowing to him from the side, keeping his body fixed and unmoving, without even swaying with the motion of his coach, without daring to spit or to wipe his nose or mop his brow in front of other people.²

I do not know whether those gestures which were noticed in me were characteristics of that first kind nor whether I really did have some hidden propensity to that vice of pride, as may well be the case; I cannot answer for the activities of my body; as for those of my soul, I want to confess now what I know about them.

In this kind of 'glory' there are two parts: namely, to rate oneself too high and to rate others too low. As for the former [C] I think we should take account of the following consideration: I am aware that I am troubled by an aberration of my soul which displeases me as iniquitous and even more as inappropriate; I make assays at correcting it, but as for eradicating it, I cannot: it consists in diminishing the real value of the things which I possess, simply because it is I who possess them, and in overvaluing whatever things are foreign to me, lacking in me or are not mine. This is a very widespread humour. Thus the man's prerogative of authority leads husbands to regard their own wives with a vicious disdain and leads many fathers to do the same to their own children; so too with me: out of two equal achievements I always come down against my own. It is not so much that a jealous concern to do better or to amend my ways disturbs my judgement and stops me from being satisfied with myself as that our mastery over anything engenders a contempt for what we hold under our sway. I am impressed by remote systems of government and of manners; so too for languages: I am aware that Latin by its dignity seduces me to favour it beyond what is appropriate to it, as it does in the case of children and the common people. My neighbour's domestic arrangements, his house and his horse, though equal to my own are better than my own because they are not mine.

Besides, I am most ignorant about myself. I marvel at the assurance and

2. Ammianus Marcellinus, XXI, xvi.

confidence everyone has about himself, whereas there is virtually nothing that I *know* that I know and which I would dare to guarantee to be able to perform. I do not have my capacities listed and classified; I only find out about them after the event, being full of doubt about myself as about everything else. The result is that if I happen to do a job in a praiseworthy fashion, I attribute that more to my good fortune than to my ability, especially since all my plans for it were made haphazardly and tentatively.

So too, [A] in a general way, the following applies to me as well: of all the opinions which [C] *grosso modo*, [A] Antiquity held about Man, the ones which I most readily embrace and to which I am most firmly attached are those which most despise us men, bring us low and treat us as nought. Philosophy never seems to me to have a better hand to play than when she battles against our presumption and our vanity; when in good faith she acknowledges her weakness, her ignorance and her inability to reach conclusions. It seems to me that the false opinion which is the mother suckling all the others, both in public and private, is the over-high opinion which Man has of himself. Those people who perch astride the epicycle of Mercury, [C] and who see so far into the heavens, [A] are an excruciating pain in the neck: for in the study that I am undertaking, the subject of which is Man, I find such extreme variation of judgement, such a deep labyrinth of difficulties one on top of another, so much disagreement and uncertainty in the very School of Wisdom, that you will understand that, since those fellows have not been able to reach any knowledgeable conclusions about themselves and their own mode of being (which is continuously before their eyes and which is within them) and since they do not understand the motions which they themselves set in action, nor how to describe and decipher the principles which they themselves hold in their hands: I cannot believe them, can I, about the cause³ of the ebb and flow of the Nile!

An eager desire to know things was given to man as a scourge, says [C] Holy [A] Writ.⁴

3. [A] until [C]: the cause of the movement of the Eighth Sphere and of the . . .

Epicycles form part of the system of Ptolomaic astronomy. Rabelais makes a similar point about Empedocles: *Pantagruel*, TLF, X, 24.

4. Inscribed, in Latin, in Montaigne's library and attributed there to Eccl. I. This is, at best, but a paraphrase of Ecclesiastes I. (There is nothing relevant in Ecclesiasticus I.)

[A]: says the sacrosanct Writ . . .

But to come to myself as an individual, it seems to me that it would be hard for anyone to esteem himself less than I do. [C] I think that I am an ordinary sort of man, except in considering myself to be one; I am guilty of the failings of the lowest ranks of the common people but I neither disown my failings nor make excuses for them. I pride myself only on knowing what I am worth. If I have an element of vainglory it is superficial, treacherously diffused in me by my complexion but having nothing substantial enough for it to be summoned to appear before my judgement. I am sprinkled all over with it but not dyed in it. [A] For in truth, whatever form they may take, where the products of my mind are concerned nothing has come forth which has fully satisfied me – and other people's approbation is no reward.

My taste is discriminating and hard to please, especially where I myself am concerned: I [C] am constantly making disclaimers and [A] feel myself to be [C] everywhere [A] floating and bending from feebleness.⁵ Nothing of mine that I possess satisfies my judgement. My insight is clear and balanced but when I put it to work it becomes confused: I have most clearly assayed that in the case of poetry. I have a boundless love for it; I know my way well through other men's works; but when I set my own hand to it I am truly like a child: I find myself unbearable. You may play the fool anywhere else but not in poetry:

Mediocribus esse poetis

Non dii, non homines, non concessere columnæ.

[Poets are never allowed to be mediocre by the gods, by men or by publishers.]⁶

Would to God that the following saying was written up above our printers' workshops to forbid so many versifiers from getting in:

verum

Nil securius est malo Poeta.

[truly nothing is more self-assured than a bad poet.]

[C] Why are not our people like these Greeks? Dionysius (the elder) thought more highly of his poetry than of anything else of his; at the season of the Olympic Games, as well as sending chariots surpassing all others in magnificence he also sent golden awnings and royally tapestried

5. [A] until [C]: feebleness. *I know myself so well that if anything came from me which pleased me, I would owe it certainly to Fortune.* Nothing of mine . . .

6. Horace, *Ars poetica*, 272–3, then Martial, *Epigrams*, XII, lxiii.

marquees for the musicians and poets who were to recite his verses. When they were performed, the charm and excellence of the way they were recited at first attracted the attention of the people; but when a little later they came to weigh the incompetence of the work itself, they began to show contempt for it; as their judgement grew more harsh they threw themselves into a frenzy and angrily rushed to knock over all his marquees and to tear them to shreds. And the fact that his chariots achieved nothing worthwhile in the races either, and that the ship which was bringing his men home missed Sicily and was driven by the storm against the coast of Tarentum and smashed to pieces, was taken by the people as certain proof that this was the wrath of the gods, as angry as they were over that bad piece of poetry. And the very sailors who escaped the shipwreck accepted the opinion of the people, to which the oracle which had predicted his death gave some support: it declared that Dionysius' end would be near when he had 'vanquished those who were worth more than he was'. Dionysius took that to refer to the Carthaginians who surpassed him in strength. So whenever he had to encounter them he often avoided victory or played things down so as not to meet the fate mentioned by the oracle. But he got it wrong: for that god was referring to the time when by favour and corruption he would be preferred in Athens to tragic poets better than he was. He entered the competition with a tragedy of his called *The Lenæans*; he won but immediately died partly because of the excessive joy he derived from this.⁷

[A] That I find my own work pardonable is not so much for itself or its true worth as from a comparison with other writings which are worse – things which I can see people taking seriously. I envy the happiness of those who can find joy and satisfaction in their own works, for it is an easy way to give oneself pleasure, [B] deriving as it does from oneself, [C] especially if they show a little confidence in their self-deception. I know one poet to whom, in both the crowd and in his drawing-room, the mighty, the humble and the very earth and heavens all cry out that he knows nothing about poetry. For all that he will not in any way lower the status which he has carved out for himself: he is for ever beginning again, having second thoughts, never giving up, all the more strong in his opinion, all the more inflexible, since he has to maintain it all alone.

7. Putarch, *Dionysius*. (The *Lenæa* were festivals of Bacchus in Athens with contests between dramatists.)

[A] My own works, far from smiling on me, irritate me every single time I go over them again:

[B] *Cum relego, scripsisse pudet, quia plurima cerno,
Me quoque qui feci iudice, digna lini.*

[When I read it over, I am ashamed to have written it, because even I who wrote it judge it worth erasing.]⁸

[A] I always have in my soul an Ideal form, [C] some vague pattern, [A] which presents me, [C] as in a dream, [A] with a better form than the one I have employed; but I can never grasp it nor make use of it. And [C] even that Ideal is only of medium rank. I argue from this that the products of [A] those great fertile minds⁹ of former times greatly surpass the farthest stretch of my imagination and my desires. Their writings do not merely satisfy me and leave me replete: they leave me thunderstruck and throw me into an ecstasy of wonder. I can judge their beauty and can see it, if not through and through at least penetrating so deep that I know it is impossible for me to aspire that far. No matter what I undertake, I owe a sacrifice to the Graces to gain their favour (as Plutarch says of someone or other).

*Si quid enim placet,
Si quid dulce hominum sensibus influit,
Debentur lepidis omnia gratiis.*

[If anything pleases, if it infuses any delight into the minds of men, all is owed to the elegant Graces.]¹⁰

But the Graces are always deserting me. In my case everything is coarse: there is a lack of charm and beauty. I cannot manage to give things their full worth; and my style adds nothing to my matter. That is why I need my matter to be solid, with plenty to get hold of, matter shining in its own right.

[C] When I seize upon more popular or more cheerful matter it is to follow my own bent: I have no love as the world has for gloomy formal wisdom; I do it to cheer up myself not to cheer up my style, which prefers grave and serious matters – that is if I ought to use the term style for my formless way of speaking, free from rules and in the popular idiom,

8. Ovid, *Ex ponto*, I, v, 15–16; written in exile on the Black Sea.

9. '88: And even in my imagination I do not conceive things in their greatest perfection. From which I know that what I see produced by those great fertile minds . . .

10. Plutarch (tr. Amyot), *Preceptes de mariage*, 147F (Plato tells the severe Xenocrates to 'sacrifice to the Graces': a goodwife should do the same). The author and source of the verse are, however, untraced.

proceeding without definitions, subdivisions and conclusions, confused like that of Amafanius and Rabirius.¹¹ [A] I have no idea how to please, delight or titillate; the best tale in the world withers in my hand and loses its sparkle. I can talk only when I am in earnest; I am quite devoid of that fluent discourse which I notice in many of my companions who are able to entertain every newcomer, to keep an entire crowd in suspense or to gain the ear of a monarch on all sorts of topics without boring him and without ever running out of things to say, because of their gift of exploiting the first matter which comes along, by adapting it to the humour and intelligence of those with whom they are dealing. [B] Princes are not very fond of solid arguments: and I am not very fond of spinning yarns. [A] Take the easiest and the most basic arguments (which are also usually the most readily grasped): I have no ideas how to use them – [C] I am bad at preaching to the common man. On any topic I like starting with my conclusions. Cicero reckons that the hardest part of a philosophical treatise is the beginning.¹² Since that is so I tackle the end. [A] Yet we have to [C] tune [A] our string to all kinds of modes: and the most acute mode is the one which is most infrequently played. There is at least as much achievement in enhancing an empty subject as in bearing up under a weighty one. Sometimes we must treat only the surface arguments; at other times we must go deeper. I am well aware that most men keep to that lower level because they are unable to conceive anything beyond the outer skin; but I am also aware that the greatest masters such as [C] Xenophon and [A] Plato can often be found slackening their string for that baser, more popular style of speaking and of treating their subjects, sustaining their style with their never-failing graces.

Meanwhile there is nothing fluent or polished about my language; it is rough [C] and disdainful, [A] with rhetorical arrangements which are free and undisciplined. And I like it that way, [C] by inclination if not by judgement. [A] But I fully realize that I sometimes let myself go too far in that direction, striving to avoid artificiality and affectation only to fall into them at the other extreme:

*Brevis esse laboro:
obscurus fio.*

11. Popular Epicurean writers, all of whose works are lost. Montaigne uses Cicero's description in the preceding lines (*Academica*, I, ii, 5). The first writer was Amafinius not Amafanius.

12. In his Latin translation of Plato's *Timaeus*, II. Then, '80: to slacken our string . . .

[I try to be brief and become obscure.]¹³

[C] Plato says that neither length nor concision are properties which add anything to one's language or detract from it.

[A] Even if I were to try to follow that other smooth-flowing well-ordered style I could never get there; and though the abrupt cadences of Sallust best correspond to my humour, I nevertheless find Caesar a greater writer and one less easy to reproduce stylistically. Although my own bent leads me to imitate rather the spoken style of Seneca, I nevertheless esteem Plutarch's more highly. In doing as in writing, I simply follow my natural form: which perhaps explains why I am better at speaking than I am at writing. Gestures and movements animate words, especially in the case of those who gesticulate brusquely as I do and who get excited. Our bearing, our facial expressions, our voice, our dress and the way we stand can lend value to things which in themselves are hardly worth more than chatter. In Tacitus Messala complains of the restrictive accoutrements of his time and the construction of the benches which orators had to speak from which weakened their eloquence.¹⁴

[A1] In pronunciation, among other things, my French is corrupted by home-grown barbarisms; I have never known a man from our part of the world who did not obviously reek of dialect and who did not offend pure French ears. Yet that is not because I have a wide knowledge of my local Périgordian speech, for I am no more fluent in that than in German; it does not concern me much. [C] It is a dialect like the others here and there around me – those of Poitou, Saintonge, Angoumois, Limoges and the Auvergne – soft, drawling and squittering. [A] Towards the mountains way above where we live there is indeed a form of Gascon which I find singularly beautiful, dry, concise and expressive, a language more truly manly and soldierly than any other I know, [C] as sinewy, forceful and direct as French is graceful, refined and ample.

[A] As for Latin, which was vouchsafed me as my mother-tongue, I have through lack of practice lost the readiness I had for talking it – [C] yes, and for writing it too, for which I was once called a clever Johnny. [A] Which shows what little I am worth from that angle.

In commerce between men beauty is a quality of great price; it is the first means of reconciling men to each other; there is no man so barbarous or uncouth as not to feel himself at least a little struck by its sweetness. The

13. Horace, *Ars poetica*, 25–6. Then Plato, *Laws*, X, 887 B.

14. Tacitus, *De Oratoribus*, XXXIX.

enjoy the body

body is a major part of our being; it ranks greatly within it; that is why the way it is built up and composed is most justly worth attention. Those who wish to take our two principal pieces apart and to sequester one from the other are wrong. We must on the contrary couple and join them closely together. We must command the soul not to withdraw to its quarters, not to entertain itself apart, not to despise and abandon the body (something which it cannot do anyway except by some monkey-like counterfeit) but to rally to it, take it in its arms and cherish it, help it, look after it, counsel it, and when it strays set it to rights and bring it back home again. It should in short marry the body and serve as its husband, so that what they do should not appear opposed and divergent but harmonious and uniform. Christians have their own special teaching about this bonding, for they know that God's justice embraces this joint fellowship of body and soul (going so far as to make the body able to enjoy everlasting rewards) and that God sees the deeds of the whole man, willing that the whole man should receive rewards or punishments according to his merits.¹⁵

[C] The Peripatetic School, the school most concerned with civility attributes to wisdom only one task: to obtain and procure the common good of these two parts in fellowship; it demonstrates that the other schools, by not being adequately devoted to the concerns of this liaison, have taken sides, one for the body the other for the soul, equally erroneous in having pulled apart their object (which is Man) and their Guide (which, for the genus Man, they swear to be Nature).

[A] The first sign of distinction among men and the first consideration which gave some of them pre-eminence over others was in all likelihood superior beauty.

[B] *Agros divisere atque dedere
Pro facie cujusque et viribus ingenioque:
Nam facies multum valuit viresque vigeant.*

[They divided up their lands and granted them to each according to his beauty, his strength and his intelligence; for beauty had great power, and strength was respected.]¹⁶

15. Unlike the pagan Greeks, Christians believe in the resurrection of the dead not in the immortality of the soul permanently freed from the body. The major source of Montaigne's important concept of the 'marriage' of body and soul is Raymond Sebond. A secondary influence is doubtless Lucretius. In general, cf. Cicero, *De finibus*, IV, vii, 16–17.

16. Lucretius, V, 1109–11.

[A] Now my build is a little below the average. This defect is not only ugly but unbecoming, especially in those who hold commands and commissions since they lack the authority given by a handsome presence and a majestic body. [C] Gaius Marius never willingly accepted soldiers who were under six foot. For the gentleman whom he is grooming *Il Cortegiano* is quite right to desire a medium height rather than any other, and to reject for him any oddity which made him conspicuous. But when that medium is lacking, to go and choose that he should fall short of it rather than exceed it is something I would not do in the case of a fighting-man. Aristotle says a small man may well be pretty but not beautiful;¹⁷ as a great soul is manifested in its greatness, so beauty is known from a body great and tall. [A] 'The Ethiopians and Indians,' he says, 'when they select their kings and magistrates take account of the beauty and height of the individuals.'¹⁸ And they were right, for a man's followers feel respect and the enemy feels dismay upon seeing a leader with a splendid beautiful stature marching at the head of his troops:

[B] *Ipse inter primos præstanti corpore Turnus
Vertitur, arma tenens, et toto vertice supra est.*

[Turnus himself, outstanding in body, is in the foremost rank, weapon in hand, head and shoulders above the others.]

Our great and holy heavenly King, every circumstance of whom should be noted with care, devotion and reverence, did not spurn the advantage of bodily beauty: '*speciosus forma præ filiis hominum*'. [fairer than the children of men.] [C] And as well as temperance and fortitude, Plato desired beauty in the guardians of his Republic.¹⁹

[A] It is highly irritating if you are asked in the midst of your own servants, 'Where is your Master?' and if, when hats are doffed, you get only the tail-end of it, after your barber or your secretary. As happened to the wretched [A1] Philopoemen.²⁰ [A] When he was the first of his

17. Gaius Marius, the conqueror of Jugurtha (Vegetius, *De re militari*, I, v); Baldassare Castiglione, *Courtier*, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IV, iii, 1123b.

18. Aristotle, *Politics*, IV, xlv; then Virgil, *Aeneid*, VII, 783-4, replacing '80: *Colloque tenuis supereminet omnes* [He stood head and neck above them]. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, 275.

19. Psalm 44 (45):3. (The application of this psalm to Christ is traditional.) Plato, *Republic*, VII, 535.

20. Montaigne had first written *Phocion*. (Anecdote from Plutarch's *Life of Philopoemen*.)

troops to arrive where he was to lodge and where he was expected, his hostess, who did not recognize him and saw him looking rather shabby, made him go and help her women-folk to draw water and to poke the fire, 'to prepare things for [A1] Philopoemen!' [A] When the gentlemen of his entourage arrived, came upon him labouring at this handsome task (for he had not failed to obey the orders given him) and asked him what he was up to, he replied, 'I am paying the price of my ugliness.' Other beauties are for the women: the only masculine beauty is beauty of stature. When a man is merely short, neither the breadth and smoothness of a forehead nor the soft white of an eye nor a medium nose nor the smallness of an ear or mouth nor the regularity or whiteness of teeth nor the smooth thickness of a beard, brown as the husk of a chestnut, nor curly hair nor the correct contour of a head nor freshness of hue nor a pleasing face nor a body without smell nor limbs justly proportioned can make him beautiful.

Meanwhile my build is tough and thick-set, my face is not fat but full; my complexion is [B] between the jovial and the melancholic, moderately [A] sanguine and hot;

Unde rigent setis mihi crura, et pectora villis;

[Whence my hairy legs and my hirsute chest;]

my health is sound and vigorous and until now, when I am well on in years, [B] rarely troubled by illness – [A] I used to be like that, for I am not considering myself as I am now that I have entered the approaches to old age, having [A1] long since [A] passed forty.

[B] *Minutatim vires et robur adultum
Frangit, et in partem pejorem liquitur ætas.*

[Bit by bit age smashes their vigour and their adult strength, and they drift into a diminished existence.]

[A] From now on, what I shall be is but half a being; it will no longer be me,

Singula de nobis anni prædantur euntes.

[One by one things are stolen by the passing years.]²¹

21. Martial, *Epigrams*, II, xxxvi, 5; then Lucretius, II, 1131-2, and Horace, *Epistles*, II, ii, 55. (In the next sentence: [A]: son of the most agile father to be seen in his time, with an energy . . .)

Skill and agility I have never had; yet I am the son of [C] a very agile father, [A] with an energy which lasted into his extreme old age. There was hardly anyone of his rank to equal him in all the physical exercises, just as I have found hardly anyone who could not do better than me except at running (at which I was among the average). As for music, either vocal (for which my voice is quite unsuited) or instrumental, nobody could ever teach me anything. At dancing, tennis and wrestling I have never been able to acquire more than a slight, vulgar skill; and at swimming, fencing, vaulting and jumping, no skill at all. My hand is so clumsy that I cannot even read my own writing, so that I prefer to write things over again rather than to give myself the trouble of disentangling my scribbles. [C] And my reading aloud is hardly better: I can feel myself boring my audience. That apart, I am quite a good scholar! [A] I can never fold up a letter neatly, never sharpen a pen, never carve passably at table, [C] nor put harness on horse, nor bear a hawk properly nor release it, nor address hounds, birds or horses.

[A] My bodily endowments are, in brief, in close harmony with my soul's. There is no agility, merely a full firm vigour; but I can stick things out, provided that I set myself to it and as long as I am guided by my own desires:

Molliter austerum studio fallente laborem.

[The pleasure hides the austerity of the toil.]²²

Otherwise if I am not attracted by some pleasure and if I have any guide but my own will, pure and free, then I am no good at all. For as I am now, except for life and health there is nothing [C] over which I am willing to chew my nails or [A] which I am willing to purchase at the cost of a tortured spirit or constraint –

[B] *tanti mihi non sit opaci*

Omnis arena Tagi, quodque in mare volvitur aurum;

[at such a price I would not buy all the sand of the muddy Tagus nor the gold which it carries down to the sea;]

[C] being extremely idle and extremely free both by nature and by art. I would as soon give the blood of my veins as to take any pains.

[A] My Soul is herself's alone and used to acting after her own fashion. Since up till now I have never had anyone giving me orders or any forced

22. Horace, *Satires*, II, ii, 12; then Juvenal, *Satires*, III, 54–5.

master I have gone my way just as far and just as fast as I liked. That has made me slack and useless to serve others; it has made me good for nothing but myself. And for myself there was no need to force my heavy, lazy, dilatory nature. Finding myself since birth with such a degree of fortune that I had cause to remain as I was, and with such a degree of intelligence as to make me appreciate that fact, I have sought nothing – and have taken nothing either:

*Non agimur tumidis velis Aquilone secundo;
Non tamen adversis ætatem ducimus austris:
Viribus, ingenio, specie, virtute, loco, re,
Extremi primorum, extremis usque prioris.*

[I do not scud with bellying sails before the good North Wind, nor does an adverse gale from the south stay my course: in strength, in wit, in beauty, virtue, birth and goods I am the last of the first and the first of the last.]²³

The only talent I needed was to be content with myself – [C] which is nevertheless an ordering of the soul (if you understand it aright) equally hard in any sort of circumstances and which in practice we can find more readily in want than in plenty, perhaps because (as is the way with our other passions too) the hunger for riches is more sharpened by having them than by lacking them, while the virtue of moderation is rarer than that of endurance. All I needed was [A] gently to enjoy such good things as God in his bounty has placed in my hands. I have never tasted [C] excruciating [A] toil of any kind. [C] I have had to manage little apart from my own affairs; or if I have had to do anything else, it was in circumstances which let me manage things in my own time and in my own way, delegated to me by such as trusted me, never bothered me and knew me. For experienced men can even get some service out of a skittish wheezing horse. My very boyhood was spent [A] in a manner slack and free,²⁴ exempt from rigorous subjection. All of which formed a fastidious complexion for me, one incapable of supporting worry – to the extent that I prefer people to hide my losses and my troubles from

23. Horace, *Epistles*, II, ii, 201–4.

Until [C]: *prioris, having been born such that I did not have to go in quest of other advantages. The only talent . . .*

24. '80: of any kind: *I am very badly schooled in self-constraint, unskilled at any sort of business or painful negotiations, having never had to manage anything but myself and being brought up from boyhood in a manner slack and free . . .*

Following verse from Horace, *Epistles*, I, vi, 45–6.

me: under the heading *Expenditure* I include whatever my indifference costs me for its board and lodging:

*hæc nempe supersunt,
Quæ dominum fallant, quæ prosint furibus.*

[superfluities which the Master never knows about and which profit the thieves.]

I prefer not to know about my estate-accounts so as to feel my losses less exactly. [B] Whenever those who live with me lack affection and its duties I beg them to deceive me, paying me by putting a good face on things. [A] I do not have firmness enough to put up with the importunate demands of those adverse accidents which we are subject to and I cannot brace myself to control and manage my affairs; so, by abandoning myself to Fortune, I nurture in me as much as I can the opinion which always sees the worst of everything; and then I resolve to bear that worst gently and patiently. That is the only thing I do work at: it is the goal towards which I direct all my arguments.

[B] Faced with danger I do not reflect on how to escape but on how little it matters that I do so. If I remained in danger what would it matter? Not being able to control events I control myself: if they will not adapt to me then I adapt to them. I have hardly any of the art of knowing how to cheat Fortune, of escaping her or compelling her, nor of dressing and guiding affairs to my purpose by wisdom. I have even less powers of endurance for sustaining the bitter painful care which is needed to do so. And the most anguishing position for me is to remain in suspense among pressing troubles, torn between fear and hope. It bothers me to make up my mind even about the most trivial things, and I feel my spirits more hard-pressed in suffering the swings of doubt and the diverse shocks of decision-making than in remaining fixed, resigned to any outcome whatsoever once the dice have been thrown. Few emotions have ever disturbed my sleep, yet even the slightest need to decide anything can disturb it for me. For my journey I avoid steep slippery downward slopes and leap into the most muddy and mirey of beaten tracks from which I can slip no lower, and find assurance there: so too I prefer misfortunes to be unalloyed, ones which do not try me, nor trouble me further about whether they can be put right, but which immediately drive me straight into suffering.

[C] *Dubia plus torquent mala.*

[Uncertain evils most torment us.]²⁵

25. Seneca, the dramatist; *Agamemnon*, III, i, 29.

[B] In events I act like a man: in the conduct of events, like a boy. The dread of a tumble gives me more anguish than the fall. That game is not worth the candle: the miser with his passion fares worse than the poor man, and the jealous husband worse than the cuckold; and there is often less harm in losing your vineyard than in pleading for it in court. The bottom step is the surest: it is the seat of Constancy; there, you need only yourself, and she can make it her base and rely on herself alone.

The following example of a gentleman known to many has something philosophical about it, has it not? He married when well on in years, having spent his youth as a good drinking-companion; he was a great raconteur and a great lover of jests. Recalling how the subject of cuckoldry had provided him with matter for stories and gibes against others, he sought protection by marrying a wife whom he chose in a place where anyone can find a woman for money and he established terms of acquaintance with her: 'Good morning, Mistress Whore!' – 'Good morning, Master Cuckold!' In his home there was no subject which he more frequently and openly entertained his visitors with than this plan of his, by which he bridled the secret gossip of the mockers and blunted the sharp points of his disgrace.

[A] As for Ambition (which is neighbour to Presumption, or rather her daughter), to find me advancement Fortune would have needed to seek me out by the hand; as for striving for an uncertain hope and submitting myself to all the difficulties which accompany those who seek to thrust themselves forward at the start of their careers, I never could have done it.

[B] *Spem pretio non emo.*

[I will not pay cash for some hope in the future.]²⁶

I bind myself to what I can see and to what I can hold on to; and I scarcely venture far from the harbour:

Alter remus aquas, alter tibi radat arenas.

[Let one oar sweep the water and the other sweep the strand.]

And then, few land such advancements without first hazarding their goods; moreover I am convinced that, as soon as a man has enough to keep the estate which he was born to and brought up for, it is madness to give up

26. Terence, *Adelphi*, II, iii, 11; then Propertius, III, iii, 23 and Seneca, the dramatist, *Agamemnon*, II, i, 47.

what he holds in his hand for the uncertain chance of increasing it. A man to whom Fortune refuses the means of not being footloose and of establishing a calm and tranquil life can be excused if he stakes all that he has on chance, since either way necessity sends him out on a quest:

[C] *Capienda rebus in malis præceps via est.*

[In misfortune dangerous paths must be taken.]

[B] And I can excuse a younger son for chancing his inheritance more than I can a man who is responsible for the honour of a household which may fall into want only through his fault.

[A] On the advice of good friends of mine in former times I have indeed found the shorter easier road to ridding myself of such desires and to remaining quiet,

cui sit conditio dulcis sine pulvere palmæ;

[a man whose pleasant lot is to gain the palms without struggling in the dusty arena;]²⁷

making also a healthy judgement that my powers are incapable of great achievements, and also remembering that quip of the late Chancellor Olivier, that the French are like monkeys which go scrambling up a tree from branch to branch, never ceasing until they reach the top; then, once they are there, they show you their arses.

[B] *Turpe est, quod nequeas, capiti committere pondus,
Et pressum inflexo mox dare terga genu.*

[It is shameful to heap loads on your head which you cannot bear, only to bend your knees and show your back.]

[A] The very qualities that I do have which do not deserve reproach are useless, I find, in this century. The affability of my manners would be called slackness and weakness; my faith and my conscience would be thought over-scrupulous and superstitious; my frankness and freedom, inconsiderate and audacious. Evil fortune does have some use: it is a good thing to be born in a century which is deeply depraved, for by comparison with others you are reckoned virtuous on the cheap. Nowadays if you have merely murdered your father and committed sacrilege you are an honest honourable man:

27. Horace, *Epistles*, I, i, 51: then, Propertius III, ix, 5-6 and Juvenal, XIII, 60-3.

[B] *Nunc, si depositum non inficiatur amicus,
Si reddat veterem cum tota æruginè follem,
Prodigiosa fides et Tuscis digna libellis,
Quæque coronata lustrari debeat agna.*

[If a friend nowadays does not deny that you entrusted money to him and returns your old purse full of rusty coins, he is a prodigy of trustworthiness, meriting a place on the Etruscan Kalendar and the sprinkled blood of a sacrificial lamb.]

And there never was a time and place in which princes could find greater or surer reward given to their generosity and justice. Unless I am mistaken, the first prince to make himself favoured and trusted in that way will, at little cost, outstrip his companions. Might and violence can achieve something, but not always and not everything.

[C] Where valour and the art of war are concerned we can see tradesmen, village wise men and artisans matching the nobility: they fight honourably in open combat and in duels; they do battle and defend cities in these wars of ours. A prince's reputation is smothered in such a throng. Let him shine forth by his humanity, truthfulness, loyalty, temperance and above all by justice – which are rare tokens now, unknown and driven abroad. It is only by the good-will of the people that he can carry on his business: no other qualities can gratify that good-will more than these, since they are more useful to them than the others are.

Nihil est tam populare quam bonitas.

[Nothing is more pleasing to the people than affability.]²⁸

[A] By such comparisons I would have found myself [C] a giant and unusual, just as I find myself a pygmy and quite commonplace in comparison with some former times in which it was indeed considered commonplace (if other stronger qualities did not accompany it) to find a man [A] moderate in revenge, slow to take offence, punctilious in keeping his word, neither treacherous nor pliant, nor accommodating his trust to the will of others and to circumstances. I would rather let affairs go hang than to warp my trustworthiness in their service.

As for that novel virtue of deceit and dissimulation that is now much honoured I hate it unto death, and among all the vices I can find none which bears better testimony to cowardice and to baseness of mind. It is an abject and a slave-like humour to go disguising and hiding yourself behind

28. Cicero, *Pro Ligario*, X.

a mask and not to dare to let yourself be seen as you are. That way, men of our time are trained for perfidy: [B] being used to utter words of falsehood, to break their word they do not scruple. [A] A noble mind must not belie its thoughts: it wants its inward parts to be seen: [C] everything there is good – or at least humane. Aristotle reckons that magnanimity has the duty to hate and to love openly, to speak with total frankness and to think nothing of other men's approval or disapproval compared with the truth. [A1] Apollonius said that it was for slaves to lie and for free-men to speak the truth.²⁹ [C] Truth is the first and basic part of virtue. It must be loved for its own sake. A man who tells the truth because he is otherwise bound to do so or because it serves him to do so, yet who is not afraid to tell lies when it does not matter to anyone, is not truthful enough. My soul's complexion is such that it flees from lying and hates even to think of it. I have an inward sense of shame and a stabbing remorse if a lie escapes me – as it does sometimes, when occasions take me by surprise and disturb me unawares.

[A] We should not always say everything: that would be stupid; but what we do say must be what we think: to do otherwise is wicked. I do not know what princes expect to get out of constantly pretending and lying, except not to be believed even when they do tell the truth. It may deceive people once or twice; but to profess your dissimulation and to boast as some of our princes have done that they would toss their very shirt on to the fire if it knew of their real intentions (which is a saying of an Ancient, Metellus of Macedon); to declare that a man who knows not how to feign knows not how to reign is to forewarn those who have to deal with them that what they say is all cheating and lies.³⁰ [C] '*Quo quis versutior et callidior est, hoc inuisior et suspectior, detracta opinione probitatis.*' [The more crafty and artful a man is, the more he is loathed and mistrusted, once he has lost his reputation for probity.] [A] A man would be very simple to let himself be deceived by the looks or words of a man who, as Tiberius did, thought it important to appear outside always different from what he was inside; and I do not know what commerce such people can have with men when they proffer nothing which you can accept at its face-value. [B] A man who is disloyal to truth is disloyal to lies as well.

29. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IV, iii, 1124b; Apollonius' remark has not been traced, but cf. Plutarch, *Comment il faut nourrir les enfants*, 6H.

30. Charles VIII. Cf. Plutarch (tr. Amyot), *Du trop parler*, 92E–F; Then, Cicero, *De Officiis*, II, ix, 34.

[C] Those writers nowadays who, when drawing up the duties of a prince, have considered only what is good for the affairs of State, placing that before his fidelity and conscience, might have something to say to a prince whose fortune had so arranged his affairs that he could for ever secure them by one single act of deception, one failure to keep his word. But things do not happen that way: princes stumble again into similar bargains: they make more than one peace, more than one treaty in their lifetime. The profit tempts them when they first prove untrustworthy – and virtually always some profit is on offer, as in every act of wickedness (sacrilege, murder, rebellion and treachery are done for some kind of gain); but that first profit entails infinite subsequent losses, putting that prince, by his first breach of trust, beyond all negotiations, beyond any mode of agreement.

When I was a boy Suleiman, of the family of the Ottomans, a family not scrupulous in keeping promises and agreements, landed his army at Otranto and he learned that Mercurino de' Gratinare and the citizens of Castro were, despite the stipulations in the treaty, still kept prisoner after surrendering their fortress. He ordered them to be released, saying that he was engaged in other great expeditions in that region and that even though such a breach of faith might have some appearance of present advantage it would bring upon him discredit and distrust which would be infinitely damaging in the future.³¹

[A] Now, as for me, I prefer to be awkward and indiscreet rather than to flatter and dissemble. [B] I confess that there is an element of pride and stubbornness in remaining open and all of a piece, with no consideration for others, and it seems to me that I become a little too free when I least ought to be so and that I react to the duty of respect by growing more heated. It may also be that for lack of art I just follow my nature. When I use then that same liberty of tongue and expression that I bring to my household, I feel how much it sinks towards a lack of discretion and rudeness. But apart from the fact that I am made that way, my wit is not supple enough to dodge a sudden question and to escape down some side-road, nor to pretend that something is true. My memory is not good enough to remember that pretence nor reliable enough to maintain it: so I act the brave out of weakness. I therefore entrust myself to simplicity, always saying what I think; by temperament and by conviction I leave the

31. Montaigne has Machiavelli's *Prince* in mind throughout this chapter. This anecdote is from the anonymous *Thesoro Politico cioè relationi, istruzioni . . . di molto importanza per li disegni di principe* (II, v), a major source in several chapters.

outcome to Fortune. [C] Aristippus said that to speak freely and openly to all men was the chief fruit he derived from philosophy.³²

[A] Memory is an instrument of wondrous service, without which judgement is hard put to it to do its duty. In me it is entirely lacking. If you want to propound anything to me you must do it bit by bit. It is beyond my ability to answer propositions in which there are several heads of argument. I could not take on any commission without my jotter. And when I myself have anything of importance to propound, if it is at all long-winded I am reduced to the abject and pitiful necessity of learning off by heart, [C] word by word, [A] what I have to say: otherwise I would have neither shape nor assurance, being ever fearful that my memory would play a dirty trick on me. [C] But for me that method is no less difficult. It takes me three hours to learn three lines of verse; and then, in a composition of my own, an author's freedom to switch the order and to change a word, forever varying the matter, makes the work harder to learn. [A] Now the more I mistrust my memory, the more confused it gets; it serves me best when I take it by surprise; I have to address requests to it somewhat indifferently, for it becomes paralysed if I try to force it, and once it has started to wobble the more I dig into it the more it gets tied up and perplexed; it serves me in its own time not in mine.

[A1] What I feel in the case of my memory I feel in many other aspects of myself. I flee from all orders, obligations and constraints. Even things I do easily and naturally I cannot do once I order myself to do them with an express and prescribed command. The very parts of my body which have a degree of freedom and autonomy sometimes refuse to obey me if I plan to bind them to obligatory service at a certain time and place. Such tyrannical and preordained constraint disgusts them: they cower from fear and irritation and swoon away.

[B] I was once in a place where it is barbarously rude not to drink when you are invited to do so: I was left completely free, but I tried to be a good fellow to please the ladies who by local custom were in the party. We had a fine old time: for this anticipated threat of having to make myself go beyond my nature and custom so blocked my gullet that I could not gulp down one single drop and I was even deprived of the wine I wanted for my dinner. All the drink that I had already taken in imagination had quenched my thirst and I had had enough!

[A1] This effect is more evident in those whose imagination gets strongly carried away: it is nevertheless quite natural; there is nobody who

32. Erasmus, *Apophthegmata*, III, *Aristippus*, VI.

does not feel it to some extent. An excellent bowman was condemned to death, but offered a chance to live if he would agree to demonstrate some noteworthy proof of his skill. He refused to make an assay, fearing that the excessive strain on his will would make his hand go wrong and that instead of saving his life he would also lose the reputation that he had acquired as an archer.

When a man is walking up and down anywhere, if his thoughts are on something else he will never fail – give an inch or so – to make the same number of equal strides; but if he goes to that place with the intention of counting and measuring his strides, he will find that he will never achieve so exactly by design what he had done naturally and by chance.

[A] My library, which is a fine one as village libraries go, is sited at one of the corners of my house. If an idea occurs to me which I want to go and look up or write down, I have to tell somebody else about it in case it slips out of my mind as I merely cross my courtyard. If I am rash enough to interrupt the thread of what I am saying, I never fail to lose it: which means that in talking I become constrained, dry and brief. Even my serving-men I have to call by the name of their office or the place which they come from, for it is hard for me to remember their names. [B] (I can tell you well enough that it has three syllables, is hard on the ear or begins with such and such a letter.) [A] And if I lasted for long I do not doubt that I would forget my own name, as others have done. [B] Messala Corvinus lived two years without any trace of memory; [C] and the same is said of George of Trebizond;³³ [B] so in my own interest I often chew over what sort of life they had and whether, without that faculty, there would be enough of me left to maintain my identity at all easily; and if I look at it closely I am afraid that, if this defect were complete, all the activities of my soul would be lost. [C] '*Memoria certe non modo philosophiam, sed omnis vitae usum omnesque artes una maxime continet.*' [It is certain that memory alone is what retains not only our philosophy but also the whole of life's practices and all the arts and sciences.]³⁴

[A] *Plenus rimarum sum, hac atque illac effluo.*

[I am full of cracks and leaking everywhere.]

[A1] More than once I have forgotten the password [C] for the watch [A1] which [C] but three hours previously [A1] another

33. Same examples in Ravisius Textor, *Officina*, s.v. *Obliviosi*.

34. Cicero, *Academica*, II (Lucullus), vii, 22; then, Terence, *Eunuch*, I, ii, 25.

man had told me or had learnt from me – [C] and, no matter what Cicero says, I have even forgotten where I had hidden my purse.³⁵ Anything I hide away privately I am helping myself to mislay. [A] Now memory is the coffer and store-box of knowledge: mine is so defective that I cannot really complain if I know hardly anything. I do know the generic names of the sciences and what they mean, but nothing beyond that. I do not study books, I dip into them: as for anything I do retain from them, I am no longer aware that it belongs to somebody else: it is quite simply the material from which my judgement has profited and the arguments and ideas in which it has been steeped: I straightway forget the author, the source, the wording and the other particulars.

[B] I am so outstanding a forgetter that, along with all the rest, I forget even my own works and writings. People are constantly quoting me to me without my realizing it. If anyone wanted to know the sources of the verse and *exempla* that I have accumulated here, I would be at a loss to tell him, and yet I have only gone begging them at the doors of well-known and famous authors, not being satisfied with splendid material if it did not come from splendid honoured hands. In them, authority and reason coincide. [C] No wonder that my own book incurs the same fate as the others and that my memory lets go of what I write as of what I read; of what I give as of what I receive.

[A] I have other defects apart from memory which greatly contribute to my ignorance. My wits are sluggish and blunt: the slightest fog will arrest their thrust, so that (for example) they can never unravel the easiest of puzzles which I set them. The vainest of subtleties can embarrass me. I have only the roughest idea of games such as chess, cards, draughts and so on in which the wits play a part. My power of understanding is slow and confused, but once it has grasped anything, as long as it continues to do so it holds on to it well, hugging it tightly, deeply and in its entirety. My eyesight is sound, whole and good at distances, but when I work it easily tires and grows lazy. That explains why I cannot have any lengthy commerce with books except through the assistance of somebody else. Those who have not made an assay of this can learn from their Younger Pliny how much such a slowing down matters to those who are given to this occupation.³⁶

35. Cicero (*De senectute*, vii, 22), 'had never known an old man forget where he had hidden his treasure!'

36. From the *Letters* of Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, the adopted son of Pliny the Elder.

Nobody's soul is so brutish and wretched that, within it, some peculiar faculty cannot be seen to shine; no soul is buried so deep that some corner of it cannot break out. How it happens that a soul which is blind and dull to everything else is found to be lively, clear and outstanding in some definite activity peculiar to itself is something you will have to inquire from the experts. But the most beautiful of souls are those universal ones which are open and ready for anything, [C] untaught perhaps but not unteachable. [A] And I say that to indict my own: for whether by weakness or indifference – and it is far from being part of my beliefs that we should be indifferent to what lies at our feet, is ready to hand or closely regards the conduct of our lives – no soul is so unfit or ignorant as mine concerning many commonplace matters of which you cannot be ignorant without shame.

I must relate a few examples.

I was born and brought up in the country, surrounded by agriculture; farming and its concerns have been in my hands ever since those who previously owned the lands which I enjoy moved over for me; yet I cannot do sums with either abacus or pen. Most of our coins I do not recognize; unless it is all too obvious I do not know the difference between one grain and another, neither in the ground nor in the barn; and in my vegetable garden I can scarcely tell my cabbages from my lettuces. I do not even know the names of the most elementary farming implements nor even the most basic principles of agriculture such as children know; [B] still less do I know anything about the manual arts, about the nature of merchandise and its trade, about the natural qualities and varieties of fruit, wine and foodstuffs, about training a hawk or curing a horse or a hound. [A] And since I must reveal the whole of my shame, only a month ago I was caught not knowing that yeast is used to make bread [C] and what was meant by 'fermenting' wine. [A] It was inferred once in Athens that a man had an aptitude for mathematics when it was seen how he arranged a pile of brushwood into faggots. They would certainly draw the opposite conclusion from me: give me a complete set of kitchen equipment and I would still go famished!³⁷

From these details of my confession you can imagine others to my disadvantage. But no matter how I may appear when I make myself known, provided that I do make myself known such as I am, I have done

37. Aulus Gellius, V, iii (Democritus judging Protagoras' ability).

[A] until [C]: famished! *And, were I to be given a horse with its gear, I very much doubt whether I would know how to harness it for my service.* From these. . .

what I set out to do. Yet I make no apology for daring to commit to writing such ignoble and frivolous matters: the ignobility of my subject [C] restricts me to them. If you will you may condemn my project: but the way I do it, you may not. [A] I can see well enough, without other people telling me, how little all this weighs and is worth and the [C] madness [A] of my design.³⁸ It is already something, if my judgement, of which these are the assays, does not cast a shoe in the process.

*Nasutus sis usque licet, sis denique nasus,
Quantum noluerit ferre rogatus Athlas,
Et possis ipsum tu deridere Latinum,
Non potes in nugis dicere plura meas,
Ipse ego quam dixi: quid dentem dente iuvabit
Rodere? carne opus est, si satur esse velis.
Ne perdas operam: qui se mirantur, in illos
Virus habe; nos hæc novimus esse nihil.*

[Go on: wrinkle your nose – a nose so huge that Atlas would not carry it if you asked him – mock the famous mocker Latinus if you can, yet you will never succeed in saying more against my trifles than I have said myself. What use is there in champing your teeth? To be satisfied you need to sink them into meat. Save your energy. Keep your venom for those who admire themselves: I know my work is worthless.]

I am under no obligation not to say daft things, provided that I do not deceive myself in recognizing them as such. It is so usual for me to know I am going wrong that I hardly ever go wrong any other way: I never go wrong by chance. It is a slight thing for me to attribute my silly actions to the foolhardiness of my humour, since I know no way of avoiding regularly attributing my vicious ones to it.

I saw one day in Bar-Le-Duc King Francis II being presented with a self-portrait by King René of Sicily as a souvenir of him. Why is it not equally permissible to portray yourself with your pen as he did with his brush?³⁹

38. '80: ignobility of my subject, which is myself, cannot tolerate any fuller or more solid ones: and in addition it is a new and fantastical humour which impels me and we must let it run. [...] worth and the boldness and rashness of my design . . .

Following lines from Martial, *Epigrams*, XIII, 2, attacking censorious critics and know-alls.

39. '80: brush? And may I not portray what I find out about myself, whatever it may be? . . .

Following line from Petrarch, Sonnet 135.

So, unfit though it is to be brought out in public, I have no wish to overlook another of my scabs: my inability to reach decisions, a most inconvenient defect when transacting the world's business. When there are doubts about an enterprise I do not know what decision to make:

[A1] *Ne si, ne no, nel cor mi suona intero.*

[My mind neither says firmly Yea nor firmly Nay.]

[B] I can defend an opinion all right, but I cannot select it.

[A] No matter what side we incline to in the affairs of men, many likely arguments come to confirm our choice – [C] that is why Chrysippus the philosopher said that he merely wanted to learn the dogmas of his Masters Zeno and Cleanthes: as for proofs and reasons he would supply them himself⁴⁰ – [A] Therefore no matter what side I turn to I can furnish myself with cause and true-sounding reasons for remaining there. So I maintain within me my doubt and my freedom to choose until the occasion becomes urgent, when, to tell the truth, I 'toss a feather to the wind' (as the saying goes) and put myself at the mercy of Fortune: the slightest of inclinations or circumstances then carries me away.

Dum in dubio est animus, paulo momento huc atque illuc impellitur.

[When the mind is in doubt, it wavers hither and thither at the merest impulse.]⁴¹

The indecision of my judgement is so equally balanced in most encounters that I would willingly have recourse to deciding by lots and by dice. And I note as having great relevance to our human weakness the examples which Holy Writ itself has left us of this practice of referring decisions of choice in matter of doubt to the hazard of Fortune: '*Sors cecidit super Mathiam.*' [The lot fell upon Matthias.]⁴²

– [C] Human reason is a dangerous two-edged sword. Just see how, even in the hands of Socrates, its most familiar and intimate friend, it is a stick with a great many ends to it.

[A] And so I am fitted only for following, and easily allow myself to be persuaded by the crowd. I do not trust enough in my powers to undertake to guide or to command. I am very happy to find my path trodden out for me by others. If I must run the hazard of an uncertain

40. Diogenes Laertius, *Life of Chrysippus*.

41. Terence, *Andrea*, I, vi, 32.

42. Acts 1:26. To choose between Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias as a successor to the apostolate of Judas Iscariot, the Church drew lots.

choice, I prefer that that choice should be guided by someone who trusts to his opinions and is more wedded to them than I am to my own, [B] the very foundations and basis of which I find inclined to slip. Yet I do not easily change my opinions, since I find the opposite ones equally weak. [C] '*Ipsa consuetudo assentiendi periculosa esse videtur et lubrica.*' [The very habit of giving one's assent seems to be slippery and dangerous.]⁴³ [A] Notably in affairs of state there is a wide field for vacillation and controversy:

*Iusta pari premitur veluti cum pondere libra
Prona, nec hac plus parte sedet, nec surgit ab illa.*

[As when a just balance weighs equal weights, neither comes down on this side nor rises on the other.]

The discourses of Machiavelli, for example, were solid enough, given their subject, yet it was extremely easy to attack them; and those who have done so left it just as easy to attack theirs too.⁴⁴ On such a subject there would always be matters for counter-arguments, counter-pleas, replications, triplications, fourth surrejoinders and that endless web of argument which our chicanery has stretched out as far as may be in favour of legal actions –

Cædimur, et totidem plagis consumimus hostem,

[The foe hits at us and we return blow for blow,]

– because such reasoning has no other basis than experience while the diversity of events offers us an infinity of examples of every kind of type.⁴⁵ A great learned person of our own time says that, when our almanacs predict cold or wet, if anyone were to put warm or dry, always saying the opposite to their predictions, he would not care which side he was on if he had to bet on the outcome except for forecasts which permit no doubt (such as predicting extreme heat at Christmas or the rigours of winter on Midsummer Day). I think the same about debates on politics: whatever role you are given your game is as easy as your opponent's, provided that you do no violence to the most obvious and evident of principles. That is

43. Cicero, *Academica*, II (Lucullus), xxi, 68; then Tibullus, IV, i, 40–1.

44. The leader of the opposition to the ruthless *raisons d'état* of *Il Principe* was Innocent Gentillet, whose treatise on government (Geneva?, 1576) was often called *l'Anti-Machiavel*.

45. Horace, *Epistles*, II, ii, 97. For the argument cf. III, 13, 'On experience'.

why, for my humour, there is no system so bad (provided it be old and durable) as not to be better than change and innovation. Our manners are corrupt in the extreme and wondrously inclined to get worse; many of our French laws and customs are monstrous and barbaric: yet, because of the difficulty of putting ourselves into a better state, and because such is the danger of collapse into ruin, if I could jam the brake on our wheel and stop it dead at this point I would happily do so.

[B] *nunquam adeo fædis adeoque pudendis
Utimur exemplis ut non pejora supersint.*

[none of the examples which we cite is so infamous and shameful that there be not worse to come.]⁴⁶

[A] I find that the worst aspect of the state we are in is our lack of stability and that our laws cannot adopt one fixed form any more than our fashions can. It is easy enough to condemn a polity as imperfect since all things mortal are full of imperfection; it is easy enough to generate in a nation contempt for its ancient customs: no man has ever tried to do so without reaching his goal; but as for replacing the conditions you have ruined by better ones, many who have tried to do that have come to grief.

[C] In my own activities I allow but a small part to my intelligence: I readily let myself be led by the public order of this world. Blessed are they who, without tormenting themselves about causes, do what they are told rather than tell others what to do; who, as the Heavens roll, gently roll with them. When a man reasons and pleads causes, his obedience is neither tranquil nor pure.

[A] To get back to myself, the only quality, in short, for which I reckon I am worth anything is the one which no man ever believed he lacked; what I commend in myself is plebeian, commonplace and ordinary, for whoever thought he lacked [C] sense? [A] That would be an assertion which implied its own contradiction; [C] lack of sense is a malady which never exists if you can see it: it is tenacious and strong, yet the first ray darting from the sufferer's eye pierces it and dispels it as the face of the sun dispels a dense mist; in this case to bring a charge is to grant a discharge, [A] and to condemn yourself would be to acquit yourself. Never was there hodman nor womanling but thought they had sense enough for their needs. In others we readily acknowledge superior courage, [C] physical [A] strength, experience, agility and beauty: but superior judgement we concede to none. And such arguments in

46. Juvenal, *Satires*, IV, 183–4.

another as derive from pure inborn wit we think that [C] we would have discovered too if only we had looked at things from the same angle. [A] The erudition, the style and such-like that we see in the works of others we can easily acknowledge when they surpass our own; but when it comes to the pure products of the intelligence, each man thinks that he has it in him to hit upon exactly the same things; only with difficulty can he perceive the weight and labour of it all [C] unless, that is, it is incomparably and extremely beyond him – and even then, only just. [A] So this is an exercise of judgement from which I must expect very little praise and honour; [C] it is a kind of writing of little renown.⁴⁷

Moreover, whom are you writing for? The scholars whose concern it is to pass judgement on books recognize no worth but that of learning and allow no intellectual activity other than that scholarship and erudition. Mistake one Scipio for the other, and you have nothing left worth saying, have you! According to them, fail to know your Aristotle and you fail to know yourself. But as for souls which are commonplace and ordinary, they cannot perceive the grace and the weight of sustained elegant discourse. And those two species occupy the whole world! Men of the third species, the one which falls to your lot, composed of minds which are strong and well-adjusted, are so rare that, precisely, they have no name or rank among us; to aspire and strive to please them is time half wasted.

[A] It is commonly held that good sense is the gift which Nature has most fairly shared among us, for there is nobody who is not satisfied with what Nature has allotted him. [C] And is that not reasonable? Anyone who would peer beyond it would be peering beyond what his sight can reach. [A] I believe that my opinions are sound and good (who does not?). One of the best proofs that I have of that's being true is that I do not think highly of myself; for if these opinions had not been firm and assured, they would easily have been led astray by the singular affection I have for myself, referring as I do virtually everything back to myself and not squandering much affection on others. All that affection which other men scatter over a boundless multitude of friends and acquaintances (and over their glory and greatness) I devote entirely to my peace of mind and to me.

47. Many changes from [A]: thought he lacked *judgement?* [...] agility and beauty and nobility: but superior judgement [...] we think that *they are ours*. The erudition [...] it is a *nature* of writing of little credit. *The stupidest man in the world thinks he has as much understanding as the cleverest. That is why* [A] It is commonly held. . .

Whatever does escape from me elsewhere is strictly not according to the dispensation of my reasoning:

mihi nempe valere et vivere doctus.

[I am learned in living and flourishing for myself.]⁴⁸

Now as for my opinions I find them infinitely blunt and tenacious in condemning me for inadequacy. Truly, more than any other, that is also a subject in which I exercise my judgement. All men gaze ahead at what is confronting them: I turn my gaze inwards, planting it there and keeping it there. Everybody looks before himself: I look inside myself; I am concerned with no one but me; without ceasing I reflect on myself, I watch myself, savour myself. Other men (if they really think about it) always forge straight ahead:

nemo tentat in sese descendere.

[no one attempts to go down into himself.]

I turn round and round in myself. I owe chiefly to myself the capacity – [A1] such as it is in me [A] – for sifting the truth and my freeman's humour for not easily enslaving my beliefs: for the firmest universal reasons that I have were, so to say, born in me. They are natural ones and entirely mine. I brought them forth crude and uncomplicated – products which are bold and strong but somewhat confused and imperfect. I subsequently confirmed and strengthened them by other men's authority and by the sound reasonings of those Ancients with whom I found myself in agreement in judgements; they made my hold on them secure and gave me the full enjoyment of their possession.

[B] Everyone seeks a reputation for a lively ready mind: I claim a reputation for steadiness; they seek a reputation for some conspicuous and signal activity or for individual talent: I claim one for the ordinate quality, the harmony and the tranquillity of my opinions and morals: [C] *'Omnino, si quidquam est decorum, nihil est profecto magis quam aequabilitas universae vitae, tum singularum actionum: quam conservare non possis, si, aliorum*

48. Lucretius, V, 959; Montaigne is about to follow the proverbial wisdom of Socrates; cf. Erasmus, *Adages*, I, VII, LXXXVI, *In se descendere*, which contains Montaigne's quotation from Persius, *Satires*, IV, 23 – a major moral commonplace; also *Nosce teipsum* (I, VII, XCV) and *In tuum ipsius sinum inspuere* (I, VII, XCIV). These adages form the cream of Socratic wisdom for many Renaissance moralists.

naturam imitans, omittas tuam. ' [If anything at all is becoming, then nothing is more so than the even consistency of your entire life and of every one of its activities: and you cannot maintain that if you imitate other men's natures and neglect your own.]⁴⁹

[A] There then you have the extent to which I feel guilty of that first characteristic which I attributed to the vice of presumption.⁵⁰ As for the second, which consists in not thinking highly enough of others, I do not know that I can plead so innocent to that – for, cost me what it will, I am determined to tell things as they are.

Perhaps because of the constant commerce I have with the humours of the Ancients and of the ideal I have formed of the richly endowed souls of the men of former times, I feel a distaste for others and for myself. Perhaps we really do live in a time which begets nothing but the mediocre. However that may be, I know nothing worthy of any great ecstasy of admiration nowadays; moreover I know hardly any men with the intimacy needed to judge them; the ones whom my circumstances commonly bring me among are not on the whole concerned with cultivating their higher faculties but are men to whom has been proposed no beatitude but honour and no perfection but valour.

Whatever of beauty I do find in others I am most ready to praise and to value: indeed I often go farther than I really think, and to that extent permit myself to lie, not being able, though, to invent falsehoods entirely. I readily bear witness to those I love of what I find praiseworthy in them: if they are worth a foot I make it a foot and a half; but what I cannot do is to attribute qualities to them which they do not have; nor can I frankly defend their imperfections.

[B] Whatever witness I owe to the honour of my very enemies I bear unambiguously. [C] My sympathies change but not my judgement; [B] I do not confound my quarrel with other circumstances which have nothing to do with it and I am so jealous for my freedom of judgement that I find it hard to give it up for any passion whatsoever. [C] By telling lies I harm myself more than the one I lie about. Attention is drawn to the laudable and noble custom of the people of Persia who, both in speaking of their mortal enemies and in waging

49. Cicero, *De officiis*, I, xxxi, III.

50. That is, blind self-love, *philautia*, which leads a man to flatter himself and to condemn others. Erasmus' adages cited in note 48 support Montaigne's contention that the wise man, by 'descending into himself', far from being selfish can avoid the vices of self-love.

total war against them, do so with such honour and equity as their virtue deserves.⁵¹

[A] I know plenty of men with specific endowments of great beauty: some have intelligence; others courage, skill, conscience, eloquence, learning and so on. But as for the kind of man who is great over all and who has so many beautiful qualities all at once [A1], or one of them to such a degree of excellence, [A] that we should be thunderstruck by him and compare him with those from times past whom we hold in honour, I have not had the good fortune to meet even one. And the greatest man I ever knew during his lifetime – I mean great for the inborn qualities of his soul and his natural endowments – was Etienne de La Boëtie; his was indeed an ample soul, beautiful from every point of view, a soul of the Ancient mould which would have brought forth great achievements if his fate had so allowed, having greatly added to its natural richness by learning and assiduous study. I do not know how it happens [C] (though it certainly does) [A] but there is more triviality and weakness of understanding in those who profess to have most ability, who engage in the literary professions and whose responsibilities are concerned with books than in any other kind of person; it is because we demand more from them and expect more, so that we cannot pardon everyday defects in them; or is it because their reputation for knowledge makes them bolder in displaying and revealing themselves so intimately that they give themselves away and condemn themselves? A craftsman gives surer proof of his stupidity when he has some rich substance in his hands and prepares it and mixes it contrary to the rules of his art than when he is working on some cheap stuff; and we are more offended by defects in a statue made of gold than in one made of plaster; so too with the learned: when they exploit materials which in themselves and in their right place would be good they use them without discernment, honouring their power of memory rather than their understanding. It is Cicero, Galen, Ulpian and St Jerome that they honour: themselves they make ridiculous.⁵²

I gladly come back to the theme of the absurdity of our education: its end has not been to make us good and wise but learned. And it has succeeded. It has not taught us to seek virtue and to embrace wisdom: it

51. According to Plutarch, the Persians held the two greatest vices to be borrowing and lying (*Qu'il ne faut point emprunter à usure*, 131C). Perhaps the origin of this assertion.

52. Philosophers study Cicero; doctors, Galen; lawyers, Ulpian; theologians, Jerome. Montaigne is criticizing all the university disciplines.

has impressed upon us their derivation and their etymology. We know how to decline the Latin word for virtue: we do not know how to love virtue. Though we do not know what wisdom is in practice or from experience we do know the jargon off by heart. Yet we are not content merely to know the stock, kindred and intermarriages of our neighbours: we want to love them and to establish commerce and communication with them: our education has taught us the definitions, divisions and subdivisions of virtue as though they were the surnames and the branches of a family-tree, without any concern for establishing between us and it any practice of familiarity or personal intimacy. For our apprenticeship it has not prescribed the books which contain the soundest and truest opinions but those which are written in the best Greek and Latin, and in the midst of words of beauty it has poured into our minds the most worthless humours of Antiquity. A good education changes a boy's judgement and morals, as happened in the case of a dissipated young Greek called Polemon who happened to attend a lecture [C] by Xenocrates [A] and who did not only take note of the eloquence and expertise of the lectures nor merely go back home bearing some knowledge of a beautiful subject but bearing more evident and solid fruit, namely the sudden change and amendment of his former life. Who has ever experienced a similar effect from the way we are taught?

*faciasne quod olim
Mutatus Polemon? ponas insignia morbi,
Fasciolas, cubital, focalia, potus ut ille
Dicitur ex collo furtim carpsisse coronas,
Postquam est impransi correptus voce magistri?*

[would you do what was formerly done by Polemon on his conversion? Would you cast aside the marks of your distemper, that is your padded legs, your cushioned elbows and your cissy scarves, as he quietly ripped the garland from his drunken neck when the words of his fasting teacher chided him?]⁵³

[C] It seems to me that the sorts of men who are simple enough to occupy the lowest rank are the least worthy of contempt and that they show us relationships which are better ordered. The morals and the speech of the peasants I find to be more in conformity with the principles of true philosophy than those of the philosophers: *'Plus sapit vulgus, quia tantum*

53. Horace, *Satires*, II, ii, 254-8.

quantum opus est sapit.' [The common people know best: they know as much as they need to.]⁵⁴

[A] The men whom I have judged most notable from their outward appearances (for to judge them my own way would entail seeing them more closely in a better light) are: in war and military ability, the Duc de Guise who died at Orleans and the late Marshal Strozzi; for men of ability and uncommon virtue, François Olivier and Michel de l'Hôpital, both Chancellors of France. Poetry too, it seems to me, has had its successes in our times. We have had plenty of good craftsmen in that mystery: Dorat, Beza, Buchanan, Michel de l'Hôpital, Montausereus and Turnebus. As for poets writing in French, I think that they have raised poetry as high as it ever will be and that in those qualities in which Ronsard and Du Bellay excel I find them close to the perfection of the Ancients. Adrian Turnebus knew more, and knew it better, than any man of his own day and for many a long year. [B] The lives of the Duke of Alva who died recently and of our own Constable Montmorency were noble ones and in some ways unusually similar in their fortunes: but the beauty and glory of the death of the Constable, in full view of Paris and of his King while serving them against his nearest kinsmen at the head of an army which he had led to victory - a victory coming suddenly as it did in his extreme old age - seems worthy to me of a place among the most notable events of our time. [C] So too the constant goodness, gentleness of manners and scrupulous courtesy of Monsieur de La Noue, who had been brought up amidst the injustice one finds among armed factions (a real school of treachery, inhumanity and brigandage) yet was a great and experienced warrior.⁵⁵

*

[95] I have been delighted to declare in several places the hopes I put in my adopted daughter Marie de Gournay, who is loved by me with a more than fatherly love and included in my solitary retirement as one of the better parts of my being. She is the only person in the world I have regard

54. Lactantius, *Divinarum Institutiones*, III, v. Also cited by Justus Lipsius, *Politici*, V, x.

55. In his list Montaigne includes men opposed to him in war or doctrine, e.g. the Spanish Duke of Alba who fought against France, and Theodore Beza, the erotic poet who became Calvin's great successor as leader of the Reformed Church. General Anne de Montmorency died, aged seventy-four, at the Battle of St-Denis, 1567. The following passage between asterisks is suspect and may have been added to the posthumous printed editions by Marie de Gournay, the subject of its praise, who edited the *Essais*.

for. If youth is any omen her soul will be capable of great things one day – among other things of that most perfect hallowed loving-friendship to which (so we read) her sex has yet been unable to aspire: the purity and solidity of her morals already suffice for this and her love for me is more than overflowing, such, in short, as to leave nothing to desire, if only the dread of my death (seeing that I was fifty-five when I first met her) were to torment her less cruelly. The judgement she made on my original *Essays*, she, a woman, in this century, so young and the only one to do so in her part of the country, as well as the known enthusiasms of her long love for me and her yearning to meet me simply on the strength of the esteem she had for me before she even knew me, are particulars worthy of special consideration.

*

[A] The other virtues are little valued nowadays, or not valued at all, but bravery has become commonplace through our Civil Wars: where that quality is concerned there are among us men whose souls are perfectly unshakeable, so numerous indeed that no selection is possible. That is all that I have come across till now of uncommon and exceptional greatness.

18. On giving the lie

[The first version of this chapter (which is indebted to the Roman satirists) insists that the self-portrait of Montaigne is destined for friends and descendants. It has been printed not for the public but because printing is more easy than copying manuscripts. The additions in [C] take a different line, as will the chapter 'On repenting' (III, 2): Montaigne insists on the moral value of his work and of telling the truth.]

[A] Yes. But somebody will tell me that my project of using myself as a subject to write about would be pardonable in exceptional, famous men who by their reputations had given us the desire to know them. That is certainly true: I admit it; I am aware that a mere craftsman will scarcely glance up from his work to look at a man of the common mould, whereas shops and work-places are emptied to look at a great and famous personality arriving in town. It is unseemly for anyone to make himself known except he who can provide some example and whose life and opinions can serve as a model. Caesar and Xenophon could firmly base their narrations on the greatness of their achievements which formed a just and solid foundation. So we can regret the loss of the diaries of Alexander the Great and of the commentaries on their own actions which Augustus, [C] Cato, [A] Sylla, Brutus and others left behind them. We love to study the faces of such men even in bronze and stone.

That rebuke is very true: but it hardly touches on me:

*Non recito cuiquam, nisi amicis, idque rogatus,
Non ubivis, coramve quibuslibet. In medio qui
Scripta foro recitent, sunt multi, quique lavantes.*

[I do not read this to anyone except my friends; even then they have to ask me; I do not do so anywhere or to anyone. Some men read their works to the public in the Forum or in the baths!]¹

I am not preparing a statue to erect at a city crossroads nor in a Church or some other public place:

1. Horace, *Satires*, I, iv, 73–5; then Persius, *Satires*, V, 19–21.