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Montaigne's Essay on Drunkenness

MICHEL EYQUEM DE MONTAIGNE (1533–1592) was a law student at thirteen and at the age of thirty-eight years he was ready to retire. His early retirement was interrupted several times by calls to public services. In his capacity as a magistrate, courtier, diplomat, soldier and lastly Mayor of Bordeaux he had occasion to deal with people in all walks of life. He took his share in the hardships of war, but he also indulged in the pleasures of princely courts. He knew men of great wisdom and even greater follies and he met with the problems created by such follies.

Montaigne never ceased wondering over human motivations and predicaments, and over the pains and pleasures of men and women. The urge to ponder over these matters in leisure was perhaps the main reason for his early retirement. The *Essays* which he wrote in the solitude of his estate were not composed with the purpose of inducing others to accept his ideas. He did not claim any general validity for his ideas. Montaigne merely described how one or another behavior impressed him. In contrast to the authoritarian trend of thought of his contemporaries, he was a skeptic. But he was neither bitter nor satirical.

In all of his essays he endeavored to illuminate every side of a question and he did not attribute to his own opinions more than the value of a personal impression. This attitude of Montaigne is expressed to perfection in his essay on drunkenness, reproduced here in the translation of E. J. Trechmann, to which I have appended a few footnotes.

E. M. J.

OF DRUNKENNESS

The world is all variety and dissimilarity. Vices are all alike in that they are all vices; and that is perhaps how the Stoics understand it. But though they are equally vices, they are not equal vices. And it is not to be believed that he who has crossed the bounds

Beyond the which no right path can be found,
(*Horace.*)

a hundred paces, is in no worse condition than he who has gone but ten; nor is it to be believed that sacrilege is no worse than the theft of a cabbage out of our garden:

Nor can right reason prove the crime the same
To rob a garden, and, by fear unawed,
To steal by night the sacred things of God.
(*Horace.*)

In this there is as great diversity as in anything else.

It is dangerous to confuse the order and the measure of sins. The murderer, the traitor, and the tyrant would get off too easily. It is not in reason that they should soothe their conscience with the excuse that some other man is idle, or lascivious, or less assiduous in his devotions. Every man weighs down his neighbour's sin, and makes light of his own. Even our teachers often range them badly, in my opinion.

As Socrates said that the principal office of wisdom is to distinguish between goods and evils, we others, the best of us being ever in a state of sin, should say the same of the knowledge which distinguishes the different sins; for, unless it be very exact, the virtuous and the wicked will remain confounded and undistinguished.

Now drunkenness, among the others, appears to me a gross and brutish vice. In others the mind has more share: in some vices there is something we may call generous. Some are blended with knowledge, diligence, valour, prudence, skill, and refinement, but drunkenness is all of the body and the earth. And the only nation in the present day among whom it is held in honour is at the same time the grossest. The other vices impair the understanding: this overturns it, and dulls the body.

When the strong wine has entered into man . . .
There follows then a heaviness of limbs,
A tangle of the legs as round he reels,
A stuttering tongue, an intellect besoaked,
Eyes all aswim, and hiccups, shouts and brawls.
(*Lucretius.*)

The worst state of man is when he loses the knowledge and control of himself. And among other appropriate things they say that, just as must, seething in a vessel, drives all the lees from the bottom to the top, so does wine, in those who have drunk to excess, uncork the most intimate secrets.*

You make the sage forget his care,
His bosom's inmost thoughts lay bare,
And drown his solemn-faced pretence
Beneath your blithesome influence.
(*Horace.*)

Josephus tells us how he wormed out the secrets of a certain ambassador sent to him by the enemy, by making him drink too much. And yet Augustus,

*Compare Seneca, *Epistles*, 83.16: "As the very vats are burnt by new wine, and as the dregs at the bottom are raised to the surface by the strength of the fermentation; so when the wine effervesces, whatever lies hidden below is brought up and made visible. As a man overcome by liquor cannot keep down his food when he has overindulged in wine, so he cannot keep back a secret either."

Montaigne also followed Seneca in contrasting this view with the stories of Lucius Piso as well as Cimber and Cassius. (See below.)

though he confided his most private affairs to Lucius Piso, who conquered Thrace, was never mistaken in him; nor was Tiberius in Cossus, to whom he disburdened himself of all his plans; and yet we know them both to have been so addicted to wine, that they had often to be carried drunk out of the Senate-house.

His veins were swelled with wine of yesterday.
(*Virgil.*)

And Cimber, who was often intoxicated, was as confidently entrusted with the design of killing Caesar, as Cassius, a water-drinker; as to which he made the witty reply: "What, I carry a tyrant, who am unable to carry my wine!" We see our Germans, drenched with wine, remembering their quarters, their watchword, and their rank.

Though soaked in wine and reeling drunk,
No easy task it is to vanquish them.
(*Juvenal.*)

I could not have believed in a drunkenness so profound, so dead and senseless, if I had not read the following in history: that Attalus, having invited to supper, with intent to put a singular indignity upon him, that same Pausanias who, for the same reason afterwards killed Philip, King of Macedon (a king whose fine qualities testified to his upbringing in the house and company of Epaminondas), made him drink so much that he could senselessly abandon his beauty, as any hedge-side drab might do her body, to the muleteers and a number of low-born slaves of his household.

And I have been told by a lady whom I hold in singular honour and esteem, that near Bordeaux, towards Castres, where she has her house, a woman of the village, a widow of chaste repute, feeling the first inklings of pregnancy, told her neighbours that she might think she was with child if she had a husband; but when from day to day her suspicion grew into evident certainty, she went so far as to authorize the priest to announce from the pulpit that, if any man should avow himself privy to the deed, she promised to pardon and, if he approved, marry him. A young labourer in her service, emboldened by this proclamation, declared that he had found her one holiday so much under the influence of wine, so fast asleep, and in so indecent a posture by her fireside, that he had been able to ravish without awakening her. They are still living as man and wife.

It is certain that in ancient times this vice was not greatly decried. Several philosophers even touch upon it very tenderly in their writings, and some of the Stoics even advise an occasional excess in wine, even to intoxication, in order to relax the mind.

They say in this too, Socrates the wise,
And great in virtue's combats, bore the prize.
(*Cornelius Gallus.*)

Cato, the censor and corrector of others, has been blamed for hard drinking:

And even old Cato's worth, we know,
Took from good wine a nobler glow.
(*Horace.*)

One of the reasons why Cyrus, so renowned a king, claimed to be a better man than his brother Artaxerxes, was that he was a much better drinker. And among the best regulated and governed nations this drink test was very prevalent. I have heard Silvius, an eminent Paris physician, say that to keep the digestive powers from becoming sluggish, it is a good thing, once a month, to prod and rouse them up by this excess, lest they should grow dull.

And we read that the Persians discussed their most important affairs after wine.

My taste and constitution are more hostile to this vice than my reason. For, besides that I am inclined to bow to the authority of the ancients, I certainly look upon it as a weak and stupid vice, but less hurtful and mischievous than the others, which almost all, and more directly, offend public society. And if, as they hold, we cannot take any pleasure but at some cost to ourselves, I am of opinion that this vice costs our conscience less than the others, besides that it is not difficult to get at and to satisfy: a consideration not to be despised.

A man, well advanced in years and dignity, said to me that he counted this among the three main comforts that remained to him in life. [And where can a man more justly expect to find comfort than in the natural pleasures?] But he looked at it from the wrong point of view. Delicacy and a careful choice of wines is to be avoided. If your pleasure depends upon your drinking to please your palate, you condemn yourself to the penance of sometimes drinking an unpalatable sort. Our taste should be freer and more easily pleased: a good toper should have a less delicate palate. The Germans will drink almost any wine with equal pleasure, their object being to pour it down rather than to taste it. They have the better bargain. Their pleasure is more copious and near at hand.

Secondly, to drink after the French fashion, at the two meals and in moderation, is to restrict too narrowly the favours of the god. It needs more time and more application. The ancients spent whole nights in this practice, often extending their potations to the following day. So we should establish our habits on a broader and firmer basis.

I have seen a great lord of my time, a man who had done great things and earned fame by his successes, who drank, without any effort and in the course of his ordinary meals, seldom less than twenty bottles of wine. And on leaving off was only too wary and knowing, as we knew to our cost.

The pleasure which we account worth while in the course of our life, should take up more of our time. Like the shop-assistant and the labouring man we should neglect no opportunity to drink, and have this desire always in our mind. It seems to me that we are every day curtailing the indulgence of it; and that the luncheons, snacks, and collations which I remember in my boyhood, were much more frequent and usual in our houses than they are now. Can it be that in some things we are in the way of improvement? Truly, no. But the fact is that we are much more given to lechery than our fathers. These are two occupations that thwart one another in their vigour. On the one hand, lechery has weakened our stomachs, and, on the other, sobriety helps to make us more spruce and more wanton in the exercise of love.*

*It was an ancient belief that nations who were moderate drinkers or abstainers indulged in sexual excess. Thus, in Plato's *Laws* (I. 637) Magillus of Lacedaemon,

Wonderful are the tales I have heard my father relate of the chastity of the times in which he lived. He was well qualified to speak of it, being well fitted, both by nature and training, for intercourse with ladies. He spoke little and well, and his language was besides sprinkled with picturesque expressions derived from books written in the vulgar tongues, especially Spanish; and among the Spanish his usual reading was that which they call *Marcus Aurelius*.*

He bore himself with a pleasing, humble, and very modest gravity. He was singularly careful of neatness and propriety in his person and dress, whether mounted or on foot. He was wonderfully punctilious in keeping his word; conscientious and scrupulous in general to the point of superstition.

For a man of low stature he was very strong, with an upright and well-proportioned figure. Of a pleasing countenance, and a complexion inclining to brown. Nimble and excelling in all kinds of gentlemanly exercises. I still remember seeing some canes filled with lead, with which they tell me he used to exercise his arms when training to throw the bar or the stone, or for fencing; as well as shoes with leaded soles, to make him lighter for running or leaping. Of his vaulting they remember little wonders. I have seen him, when past sixty, putting our agility to shame by leaping into the saddle in his furred gown, making the round of the table on his thumb, and scarcely ever mounting the stairs to his room without taking three or four steps at a time.

In the matter I am speaking of he declared that in the whole of a province there was scarcely one woman of quality with an evil reputation. He would tell of strange intimacies, especially his own, with honest women, quite above suspicion. And he solemnly swore of himself, that he was a virgin when he married. Yet he had taken part for a considerable period in the wars beyond the mountains, of which he has left a journal written in his own hand, giving all the details of what happened there, both of general interest and concerning himself in particular.

He consequently married when he was well on in years, at the age of thirty-three, in the year 1528, on his way home from Italy. Let us return to our bottles.

The discomforts of old age, which has need of some support and refreshment, might reasonably beget in me a desire for this faculty of drinking. For it is, we might say, the last pleasure that the course of years robs us of.

The natural heat, so the good fellows say, begins in the feet: that concerns infancy. From thence it mounts to the middle regions, where it long takes root and produces, in my opinion, the only true pleasures of the bodily life. The other pleasures are comparatively dormant. Towards the end, like a rising and exhaling vapour, it arrives at the gullet, which it makes its final resting-place.

I cannot, however, understand how a man can prolong the pleasure of drinking beyond his thirst, and forge in his imagination an artificial and un-

who extols his nation's abstinence from wine, is told by the Athenian: "An Athenian in self-defense might at once retaliate by pointing to the looseness of the women in your country." (Transl. R. G. Bary.)

*This refers to the idealized picture of Marcus Aurelius as sketched by the Spanish writer Antonio Guevara y de Norona (1480?–1545) in his *Relos de Principes con el libro de Marco Aurelio*.

natural appetite. My stomach could not go to those lengths: it has enough to do to deal with what it takes for its need. By disposition I care not to drink except after eating, consequently my last draught is almost always the biggest.

[And since in old age our palate is thickened with phlegm or depraved by some ailment, wine tastes the better if our pores are washed and opened; at least it rarely happens that I really relish the first draught.]

Anacharsis wondered at the Greeks drinking from larger glasses at the end than at the beginning of their meals; they did it, I imagine, for the same reason that the Germans do it, who then begin their drinking contests.

Plato forbids the use of wine by children before they are eighteen years of age, and intoxication before the age of forty. But after they have passed that age, he orders them to take a pleasure in it, and to mingle copiously with their convivialities the influence of Dionysos, the kind god who restores cheerfulness to men and youth to the aged, who softens and melts the passions of the soul, as iron is melted by fire. In his *Laws* he declares these convivial gatherings to have their use, provided there be a master of the feast to enforce rule and restraint; intoxication being, he says, a good and certain test of every man's nature, and at the same time calculated to put heart into the elderly and give them a delight in dancing and music: wholesome pleasures which they dare not indulge in when sober. He adds that wine is capable of making the soul mellow and the body healthy.

He approves, however, the following restrictions, in part borrowed from the Carthaginians: That no wine be drunk on warlike expeditions; That every judge and magistrate abstain from it when about to enter on his duties, and before discussing public business; That we shall not spend the day over it, a time due to other occupations, nor the night which we have reserved for procreation.

It is said that the philosopher Stilpo, weighed down by old age, purposely hastened his end by drinking his wine unmixed. A like cause, but not of his own design, also extinguished the vital spark of the philosopher Arcesilaus, when broken by old age.

But it is an old and absurd question, "Whether the soul of the wise man is of a nature to yield to the strength of wine?"

Should we lay siege to wisdom's stronghold?

(*Horace.*)

To what absurdity are we not driven by our self-conceit! The best-regulated soul in the world is hard put to it to keep her feet, and to guard against being thrown to earth through her own weakness. Not one in a thousand is erect and sober for an instant in life. And it may be doubted if, in her natural state, she can ever be so. But if she be steadfast, she will attain to the highest state of perfection; provided, I mean, that she be subjected to no shock, which may happen in a thousand ways.

Much good did Lucretius, that great poet, get from his philosophy and his strength of mind, when behold him maddened by a love-philtre! Do you think that Socrates could not be floored by a fit of apoplexy, as well as any porter? Some, under the influence of a malady, have even forgotten their own names, and a slight wound has turned the judgment of others topsy-turvy.

Let him be as wise as he will he is after all a man, and what can be imagined more crazy, more miserable, and insignificant? Wisdom does not master our natural disposition:

Sweats and pallors spread
Over the body, and the tongue is broken,
And fails the voice away, and ring the ears;
Mists blind the eyeballs, and the joints collapse,—
Aye, men drop dead from terror of the mind.

(*Lucretius.*)

He has to blink his eyes when threatened by a blow; he has to quake like a child on the brink of a precipice, Nature having reserved to herself those slight marks of her authority, which are proof against our reason and stoic virtue, to teach man his mortality and frailty. He turns pale with fear, red with shame: a sharp attack of the colic will make him, if not shout with despair, at least utter a broken and muffled groan:

From human ills he shall not be exempt.

(*Terence.*)

The poets, who invent all things to suit their humour, dare not even acquit their heroes of the weakness of tears:

Weeping he speaks, and gives his fleet the rein.

(*Virgil.*)

Let it be enough if a man curbs and moderates his inclinations, for it is not in him to banish them. Even our Plutarch, so perfect and excellent a judge of human actions, seeing Brutus and Torquatus kill their children, begins to doubt whether virtue could go to such lengths, and whether those men were not rather stirred by some other passion. All actions exceeding the ordinary bounds are liable to a sinister interpretation, seeing that we cannot appreciate what is above us any more than what is beneath us.

We may leave aside that other sect that openly professes a proud spirit, but when, even in that sect which is regarded as the more effeminate, we hear these braggings of Metrodorus: *I have anticipated and caught you, Fortune; I have cut off every access, so that you cannot reach me* (*Cicero*); When Anaxarchus, lying in a stone trough by command of Nicocreon, tyrant of Cyprus, and belaboured to death with an iron mallet, cries unceasingly, "Strike, break; it is not Anaxarchus but his shell that you are pounding"; When we hear our martyrs, in the midst of the flames, crying to their tyrant, "This side is sufficiently roasted; slice it, eat it, it is well done; begin on the other side"; When we hear that boy in Josephus, his flesh torn to pieces by biting pincers, and pierced by the bodkins of Antiochus, still defying him and crying with a firm and assured voice, "Tyrant, you are wasting your time, I am still at my ease; where is that pain, where are those tortures you threaten me with? Is this all you can do? My fortitude pains you more than your cruelty does me. O poor weakling! you are giving way, and I am growing stronger; make me complain, make me yield, if you can; put heart into your satellites and executioners: see, they are losing courage, they cannot stand it; arm them, stir them up!"

When we see all this, we must truly admit that there is some derangement, a sort of frenzy in these souls, how holy soever.

When we come to these stoic outbursts: *I had rather be mad than voluptuous*, a saying of Antisthenes; When Sextius tells us that he would rather be fettered with pain than with sensuality; When Epicurus tries to think he is caressed by his gout, and, refusing health and repose, defies his ills with a gay heart; and when, despising the less acute pains, disdainingly to battle and struggle with them; he wishes and calls for others more violent, more painful, more worthy of him,

No more
He heeds such timid prey, but longs to hear
The tawny lion, issuing with a roar
From forth the lofty hills, or front the foaming boar,
(*Virgil.*)

who will not conclude that these are outbursts of a courage thrown off its balance?

Our soul cannot from her seat reach to such a height. She must quit it and rise, and, taking the bit between her teeth, forcibly carry her man so far, that he will afterwards be astounded at his own deeds. So, in the exploits of war, the generous soldier is often impelled in the heat of combat to deeds of so perilous a nature that, having come to himself, he is the first to be struck with amazement.

And so the poet is often rapt in admiration of his own work, no longer recognizing the track along which he ran so fine a race: in him also we call it madness and frenzy. And as Plato says that in vain does a sober-minded man knock at the door of poetry, so Aristotle says that no mind of any eminence is free from a tinge of madness. And he is right in calling madness every transport, however admirable, that transcends our reason and judgment; seeing that wisdom is a well-ordered government of our soul, carried out with measure and proportion, for which she is responsible to herself.

Plato argues thus: "that the power of prophecy is above us; that we must be beside ourselves when we exercise it: our sober senses must be clouded either by sleep or by some malady, or lifted from its place in a heavenly rapture."