

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 19

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To Philosophize Is to Learn to Die

^a CICERO says that to philosophize is nothing more than to prepare for death.¹ It could be because study and meditation come close to taking our soul away, keeping it occupied outside of the body, as if rehearsing and mimicking death. Or it could be that all the wisdom and reasoning in the world ultimately come down to this: teaching us not to fear death. In truth, either philosophy is a waste of time or its purpose really is our happiness and it should, in everything it does, bring us closer to living well, at our ease, as Holy Writ says.² All of the world's doctrines get to this point eventually^c — pleasure is our goal —^a even when they find different paths to it. We would quickly dismiss them otherwise. Who would listen to anyone offering to lead us to pain and suffering?

^c Philosophical sects argue only about terminology on this point. *Transcurramus sollertissimas nugas*. (Stubbornness and bickering have no place in this saintly work but people will be people no matter what role they aspire to play.) Say what they will, even in virtue our ultimate goal is pleasure, a word they find distasteful but which I like for them to hear me say again and again. For if we take it to mean absolute satisfaction and extreme enjoyment, better it served virtue than anything else. This kind of pleasure, for being more hardy, spirited, robust, and manly, is an all the more meaningful pleasure. We ought to have given virtue a more favorable, natural, and sweet name — pleasure — instead of naming it after vigor, as we did.³ As for the other, lower kind of pleasure, whether it deserves this beautiful name ought to be a matter of comparison and not a privilege. I find it less free of difficulties and hurdles than virtue. Not only is its enjoyment short-lived, shifting, and faint, but it can drain us of our sleep, our appetite, our leisure, our blood and sweat. What is more, its emotions are sharp and clashing while its resolution weighs so heavily on us that it feels like regret. We are so wrong to believe that these difficulties act as a spur, a spice to its sweetness — as one thing is excited by its opposite in nature — but then to say, about virtue now, that similar effects and difficulties weaken it, and make it austere and inaccessible. In fact, they ennoble, sharpen, and heighten the divine and perfect pleasure that it brings, much more appropriately than in feelings of pleasure. Those who weigh the costs of virtue against its benefits are unworthy of knowing it. They know neither its graces nor its uses. And those who

Let us skip over this most clever nonsense. • SEN., EP., 117

teach us that seeking it is difficult and burdensome but that its enjoyment is pleasant, what are they saying if not that it is always unpleasant? By what human means can we ever hope to enjoy it? The most perfect ones among us have only aspired to it and tried to get close to it without ever obtaining it. But they are wrong. In all known pleasures, the chase itself is what is pleasurable. Pursuits are judged by the quality of that which they set their sights on because it is an important part of their effect and is consubstantial with them. Happiness and bliss, which burn bright in virtue, light all that belongs to it and all that leads to it, from the beginning to the very end. Yet it is disregard for death, one of the main benefits of virtue, that imparts a soft peacefulness to our life, that makes it taste pure and sweet to us, and without which any other pleasure is extinguished.

^a This is why all precepts converge and agree on this point. And though they all also direct us to disregard pain, poverty, and other accidents to which human lives are subjected, they do so to a lesser degree. This is as much because these accidents are not so assured — most people spend their life without experiencing poverty, and others still without pain and illness, like Xenophilus the Musician who lived one hundred and six years⁴ in full health — as it is that, if worse comes to worse, death can put an end to, and take the sting out of, any type of hardship any time we want. But as for death, it is unavoidable.

^b *Omnes eodem cogimur, omnium
Uersatur urna serius ocus
Sors exitura et nos in aeternum
Exilium impositura cymbae.*

All of us are summoned to the same place. Our lot, shaken out of the urn, sooner or later will be coming out to set us on the ferry to eternal exile. • HOR., CARM., 2.3.25

^a It follows that, if it frightens us, death becomes a never-ending source of torment from which there is no relief. ^c There is no place where it will not find us. We can constantly be on the lookout, as if in a dangerous land: *quae quasi saxum Tantalo semper impendit* ^a Our courts often have criminals executed where their crime was committed. Take them by beautiful houses on the way, and feed them as well as you please,

Always hanging over us like the stone over Tantalus. • CIC., FIN., 1.60

^b *non Siculae dapes
Dulcem elaborabunt saporem:
Non auium, cytharaeque cantus
Somnum reducent.*

Fancy Sicilian banquets will not taste sweet. The melody of birds and harps will not bring back sleep. • HOR., CARM., 3.1.18

^a Do you think they can enjoy it, and that having plainly before their eyes their final destination has not changed and spoiled their taste for all these goods?

^b *Audit iter, numeratque dies, spatiisque uiarum
Metitur uitam, torquetur peste futura.*

He hears of the journey and counts the days. He measures his life by the distance to travel. He is tortured by the disasters ahead. • CLAUD., RUE., 2.2.137

^a Death is our journey's destination, the object on which we must set our sights. If it frightens us, how can we take a single step forward and not be worried sick? For common folks, the solution is not to think about it. But what kind of primitive stupidity leads them to such crude blindness? *Qui capite ipse suo instituit uestigia retro* bridles the donkey by the tail.

He who points his feet one way and his head the other • LUCR., 4.472

^a No wonder they usually find themselves trapped. These people are easily scared when we bring up death. Most cross themselves upon hearing the word, as they do with the devil's name. Do not expect them to draw up a will, where death is mentioned, unless a doctor has handed them a death sentence. At which point, caught between pain and fright, Lord knows how they can keep a clear head to deal with it!

^b This one syllable word was so painful to the Romans' ears, the sound of it so unfortunate to them, that they had learned to soften it or thin it with circumlocutions. Instead of saying "He is dead," they say "He is no longer living," "He has lived." If life is in it, even past life, they feel better. We borrowed our "late Sir So-and-so"⁵ from this.

^a So why not settle our debt as late as possible, so to speak? I was born between eleven and noon on the last day of February 1533 (as we reckon nowadays, with the year starting in January).⁶ Only fifteen days ago, I turned 39, and I should hope for at least as much time yet. But it would be silly to worry about something so far off. — Is that so? Young and old depart the same way. ^c All leave life as easily as they entered it, ^a even though there is not a decrepit old man who, picturing Methuselah⁷ before him, does not think he has twenty more years still in him. And say, old fool, who told you about the duration of your life? You believe doctors and their fairy tales; pay attention to facts and experience instead! Judging by the normal course of events, you have been extraordinary lucky already. You have lived more than the usual amount. Check and see how many more you know who died younger than you than have reached your age. And count those whose fame ennobled their life and I would wager that you would find more who died before turning thirty-five than after. It is a very reasonable and pious thing to follow the example of Jesus Christ's human life. Yet his ended at thirty three. And the greatest man—just a man, he—Alexander, lived to the same age.

^a How many ways can death surprise you?

^a *Quid quisque uitet, nunquam homini satis
Cautum est in horas.*

However much one tries, one is never careful enough to escape every time. • HOR., CARM., 2.13.13

^a Never mind fevers and pleurisies! Who would have thought that a duke of Brittany could suffocate in a crowd, as did this one, in Lyon, upon the arrival of Pope Clement, my neighbor?⁸ Did you not see one of our kings get killed in a game?⁹ Did one of his ancestors not die when a pig knocked him down?¹⁰ Aeschylus, living with the threat of a house falling on him, no matter how vigilant he remained, there he went, knocked out by a tortoise shell that had slipped from the talons of an eagle in flight. Here is another one who died because of a single grape; and an emperor from the scratch of a comb; Aemilius Lepidus from slamming his foot against the threshold of his front door; and Aufidius from walking into the door of the counsel chamber. Between the legs of women: Cornelius Gallus, a praetor; Tigellinus, a captain of the night watch in Rome; Ludovico, the son of Guido of Gonzaga, marquis of Mantua. A worse example yet: Speusippus, a Platonist philosopher; one of our popes too. That unfortunate Bebius, a judge, grants a delay of a few days to a party and soon is gone, with no more days of his own to live. Also Caius Julius, a doctor, applying ointment to a patient's eyes; here goes death closing

his.¹¹ And if I may add something of myself to this list: a brother of mine, Captain Saint-Martin, twenty-three and his valor already quite established, who was hit by a ball at tennis. It struck him slightly above the right ear, leaving neither visible bruise nor wound. He felt no need to sit down or even rest but, five or six hours later, died of a stroke caused by the hit.¹² With these examples so frequent and so common before our eyes, how can we let go of the idea of death and of the feeling that, at every moment, it has us by the scruff of the neck?

^a You might say: "Who cares how it happens as long as it is painless?" I agree with you. I am not one to walk away from whatever means we have of shielding ourselves from blows, even if we look cowardly doing so. I only want an easy way forward. And any advantage I can find, I will take, no matter how little glory or little to emulate you see in it.

^a *Praetulerim ... delirus inersque uideri,
Dum mea delectent mala me uel denique fallant,
Quam sapere et ringi.*

^a But it is madness to think of proceeding that way. They come; they go; they run; they dance. No sign of death: Wonderful! But as soon as it comes either for them or their wives, for their children or their friends, and catches them unprepared and defenseless, they are overcome with anxiety, cries, rage, and despair. Have you ever seen anything so beaten, so changed, so sorry? The time to prepare for it is past! This crude nonchalance, were it to take root in the mind of an intelligent person (which I find entirely impossible), is much too costly indeed. If death were an enemy that could be evaded, I would suggest borrowing from cowardice's arsenal. But since it cannot be, and since it will catch you fleeing, whether you are a coward or an honorable person,

^a *Nempe et fugacem persequitur uirum,
Nec parcat imbellis iuuentae
Poplitibus timidoque tergo.*

^b and since no grade of armor can protect you,

^b *Ille licet ferro cautus, se condat et aere,
Mors tamen inclusum protrahet inde caput*

^a let us learn to stand our ground and fight it. First, to deprive it of its greatest advantage against us, let us do the opposite of what is commonly done. Let us deny it its foreignness by getting to know it, taming it, and having nothing more often in mind than death. We must imagine it in everything, at all times. At the stumble of a horse, the fall of a roof tile, the mere prick of a pin, say it again, at once: "What if this, here, were death?" And, with this, let us harden ourselves and practice. When celebrating and having a good time, let this line, this reminder of our condition, stay with us. Let us not be so taken by pleasure that we forget about the constant struggle between death and this happiness of ours, and about how one threatens to overcome the other. The Egyptians did this: They had the skeleton of a man brought in the midst of their feasts, and among their best dishes, to serve as a warning to their guests.¹³

I would prefer to be seen as silly and slow, so long as my flaws keep me happy and even ignorant, rather than being knowledgeable and irritated. • HOR., EPIST., 2.2.126

Indeed [death] pursues the one who flees and does not let go of the heel or the weak back of the youth who will not fight. • HOR., CARM., 3.2.14

He could barricade himself carefully behind iron and bronze, death would still pull his head out from where it is covered. • PROP., 3.18

*a Omnem crede diem tibi diluxisse supremum
Grata superueniet, quae non sperabitur, hora.*

Believe each day may be your last
and you will be thankful for an
hour you did not expect. • HOR.,
EPIST., 1.4.13

^a We cannot know for certain where death awaits us, so let us expect it everywhere. Preparing for death is preparing for freedom. Those who have learned to die have unlearned to live in servitude. ^c There is no wrong in life for those who have understood once and for all that being deprived of life is not wrong. Knowing how to die frees us from subjection and servitude. ^a Paulus Aemilius told the messenger sent by that miserable king of Macedon, his prisoner, to beg for his master not to be paraded at his triumph: "Let him ask this favor of himself."¹⁴

^a And really, if nature ever falls short, art and industry can often take things a bit further. I am not given to melancholy but I am a daydreamer, and there is nothing I have fantasized about more than death, even at my most carefree.

b Lucundum quum aetas florida uer ageret.

When a flourishing time made for
a happy spring. • CATULL., 68

^a Where there were women and games, some believed I was distracted by my own thoughts, like jealousy or doubt over a new romance. Meanwhile, I was thinking about someone or other coming down with a high fever a few days ago, about how they had left a similar party, carefree, in love, and happy, like me. I was thinking about how I could be next.

b Iam fuerit, nec post unquam reuocare licebit.

Soon it has passed and never can it
be called back. • LUCR., 3.915

^a This particular thought did not make me frown any more than another. At first, it is impossible not to feel the sting of these ideas. But as we use and refine them, as time goes by, we certainly learn to control them. Otherwise I would have lived in constant fear and frenzy. For no one ever took their life less for granted; no one ever cared less about its length. I neither expect more of it because of my health, which has been very vigorous until now, with few interruptions, nor less of it because of diseases. With every passing minute, I seem to slip away. ^c So I tell myself all the time: Anything that can be done some other day can be done today. ^a In fact, chance and danger move us little or not at all closer to our end. So if we think about how much of our life is left, leaving aside this threat of a million more threats hanging over our head, we will find that, vigorous or sickly, at sea or at home, in battle or in bed, death is equally close to us. ^c *Nemo altero fragilior est; nemo in crastinum sui certior.*

No one is more vulnerable than
another. No one is more certain of
tomorrow. • SEN., EP., 91.16

^a Whatever time I have, even a whole hour, seems short to take care of what I must before I die. Someone was looking through my papers the other day and found a note about something I wanted to see done after my death. I told him, since that was the case, that being only one league from my house, healthy and spry as I am, I had written it down in a hurry for not feeling certain I would make it back home. ^c Since I have been keeping these ideas alive in me at all times, to grow comfortable with them, I am as ready as can be. Death will teach me nothing new when it comes.

^a We must always have our boots on and, as much as possible, be ready to go. Above all, let us make sure only to have ourselves to worry about when the time comes.

♣ *Quid breui fortes iaculamur auo
Multa?*

♣ Indeed we will be busy enough already. This one here complains that death will interrupt his brilliant victory; this other that he has to depart before his daughter is married or his children's education sorted out. One misses the company of his wife, another one of his son, likely the most precious parts of his life.

♣ I find myself, thank God, able to depart whenever He pleases, leaving no loose ends. I have freed myself from everything. My goodbyes are said to all but to myself. No one has ever been ready to leave the world more simply and fully. No one has ever extricated themselves from it more totally than I am attempting to. The most definitive deaths are the most sound.

♣ *'Miser, O miser, 'aiunt, 'omnia ademit
Una dies infesta mihi tot praemia uitae.'*

♣ and the builder says,

♣ *Manent opera interrupta, minaeque
Murorum ingentes.*

♣ No plan should be made on such a large scale, or at least not if we feel we must see it through to the end. We are born for doing:

♣ *Quum moriar, medium soluar et inter opus.*

♣ I wish for us to be doing, ♣ and to carry on with our responsibilities in life while we still can. ♣ I want death to find me planting my cabbages, indifferent to it, with my garden still a work in progress. I saw someone who, at death's door, kept complaining that his fate was interrupting his history of the fifteenth or sixteenth of our kings.

♣ *Illud in his rebus non addunt: nec tibi earum
iam desiderium rerum super insidet una.*

♣ We must abandon these lowly and harmful feelings. In fact, we have dug our cemeteries next to churches, and in the busiest places in town, so that common folks, women, and children learn not to be frightened by the sight of a dead body, according to Lycurgus, and so that the never-ending show of bones, tombs, and corteges reminds us of our condition.

♣ *Quin etiam exhilarare uiris conuiuia caede
Mos olim, et miscere epulis spectacula dira
Certantum ferro, saepe et super ipsa cadentum
Pocula, respersis non parco sanguine mensis.*

♣ And, like the Egyptians who had someone at their banquets show a full likeness of death to those in attendance and shout: "Drink and be merry for this will be you,"¹⁵ ♣ I made it a habit not only of picturing death but also of always speaking about it. And so there is nothing I inquire about

With such short lives, why do we pull in so many directions? • HOR., CARM., 2.16.17

"Poor, poor me!" they cry. "One horrific day has deprived me of all that life has to offer." • LUCR., 3.898

The works remain incomplete; walls loom unfinished. • VERG., AEN., 4.54

When I die, may I fade in the midst of my work. • OV., AM., 2.10.36

They leave this part out: no desire for such things remains in you. • LUCR., 3.900

It was even a custom then to delight people at banquets with bloodshed, to mix dining with the frightful spectacle of sword fighting, the dead often falling right over the guests' cups and covering the tables in blood. • SIL., PUN., 11.51

more freely than people's death — their words, their expression, their behavior—and no point of a story to which I pay more attention.

«The wealth of my examples speaks of it. Also of my particular affection for the subject matter. If I were a maker of books, I would put together a catalog, with commentaries, of various deaths. If you could teach people to die, you could teach them to live.¹⁶

«Dicaearchus made such a book but with a different and less useful purpose.

«They will tell me that the deed so far exceeds the thought that there is no clever parry that would not fail when the hour came. Let them say it! Surely forethought confers a great advantage. And is it not worth something to reach that point confident and composed? There is more: Nature herself lends us a hand and gives us courage. If death should be sudden and violent, we have no time to fear it. If otherwise, I notice that as the disease progresses, naturally I begin to value life less. I find that it is much harder for me to process this acceptance of death when I am healthy than when I am sick. What life has to offer is much less precious to me when I begin to lose the ability to make use of it and enjoy it, and so I see death in a much less frightening light. This gives me hope that the farther I move from one, and the closer I move toward the other, the more easily I will accept the exchange. I have also had several occasions to judge of what Caesar says, namely that things often seem bigger from a distance than up close. I found that I was more terrified of diseases when I was free of them than when I had them. The happiness I feel, vigor and pleasure too, make that other state seem so out of proportion with this one that I overestimate the magnitude of this discomfort by half. I picture it much greater than I find it to be when I feel its weight on my shoulders. I hope the same happens to me with death.

«Let us consider how, in these moments of change and decline which we experience, nature robs us of the ability to see what is lost and deteriorating. What is left in an old man of the energy of his youth and of his past life?

«*Heu! senibus uitae portio quanta manet.*

Alas! What of life remains for old men? • MAX., EL., 1.16

«Caesar, after he glanced at the decrepit figure of one of his guards, a soldier, exhausted and injured, who had met him in the street to ask leave to kill himself, answered jokingly: "So you think you are alive?" «If we reached that point all at once, I do not believe we could bear such changes. But Nature leads us by the hand, down a gentle, imperceptible slope, little by little, step by step, and tricks us into this miserable state and gets us used to it. Indeed, we are not shaken by the death of our youth which, in reality, is a harder death than the long death of a languishing life or than death from old age. In fact, the jump from being poorly to not being at all is not as hard as that from a flourishing and sweet existence to a tiresome and painful one.

«A stooped and hunched body has less strength to carry a burden. The same goes for our soul. It should be raised to stand against this adversary. And as it cannot possibly rest while it fears death, so if it learns not to fear it, it can claim—something which almost exceeds our

human abilities — to have made it impossible for anxiety, anguish, and fear (and even the slightest worry) to reside in it.

*b Non uulnus instantis tyranni
Mente quatit solida, neque Auster
Dux inquieti turbidus Adriae,
Nec fulminantis magna Jouis manus.*

^a The soul becomes mistress of its passions and appetites, mistress of indulgence, shame, poverty, and all other injuries of fortune. Let us learn this skill if we can. This, here, is true and superior freedom which lets us thumb our nose at coercion and injustice, and laugh at jails and shackles.

*a In manicis et
Compedibus saevo te sub custode tenebo.
Ipse Deus, simul atque uolam, me soluet. Opinor,
Hoc sentit; moriar; mors ultima linea rerum est.*

^a Our religion has had no surer foundation than indifference to life. Not only do rational arguments lead us to this conclusion — for why should we fear to lose something which we cannot regret once lost? — but also, when so many things threaten to cause our death, is it not worse to fear all of them rather than to suffer one?

^c Who cares when death is coming since it is inevitable? “The Thirty Tyrants have sentenced you to die” they told Socrates. “And Nature them,” he answered.

^c How silly to worry about the moment of transition to an end to our suffering!

^c As our birth brought us the birth of all things, so will our death the death of all things. Which means that it is equally mad to despair because we will not be alive a hundred years from now as it is to despair that we were not alive a hundred years ago. Death is the beginning of another life: so we cried and so we struggled to enter this life; and so we shed our old veil as we entered it.

^c That which occurs only once cannot be a burden. Is it reasonable to fear for so long something which lasts only so little? Death makes living a long life and living a short life the same, for long and short is irrelevant to things that no longer are. Aristotle says that there are small creatures on the river Hypanis that live only a day. Those that die at eight in the morning die young; those that die at five in the evening die at a decrepit old age. Who among us would not find it laughable to consider the good or bad luck in this amount of time? Having more or less time in ours, when compared to eternity, or the lifespan of mountains, rivers, stars, trees, or even some animals, is no less ridiculous.

^a Nature leaves us no choice anyway. She says: “Leave this world as you entered it. The same transition you made from death to life, without restlessness or fear, make it again from life to death. Your death is one of the parts of the order of the universe, a part of the life of the world.

Neither the tyrant’s menacing expression, nor Auster, the South Wind, lord of the stormy Adriatic, nor the great thundering fist of Jupiter, can unsettle this steady soul. • HOR., CARM., 3.3.3

“I will put a cruel guard to watch you, your hands and feet shackled.” — “And as soon as I wish for it, God himself will set me free.” This means “I will die,” I believe. Death is the limit of all things. • HOR., EPIST., 1.16.76

‡ *Inter se mortales mutua uiuunt
Et, quasi cursores, uitai lampada tradunt.*

‡ Should I change the beautiful fabric of the world for your sake? Your existence depends on it! Death is a part of you. You are running away from yourself: this *you* you are enjoying is equal part life and death. The day of your birth sets you on a path to die, and to live too.

‡ *Prima, quae uitam dedit, hora carpsit.*

‡ *Nascentes morimur, finisque ab origine pendet.*

‡ You steal your whole life from life. All of it is at its expense. The perpetual work of your existence is to build your death. You are in death while you are in life as you are after death when you are no longer in life.

‡ Or, if you prefer: after life, you are dead; but during life, you are dying. And death affects the dying much more harshly than it does the dead, more vividly and more essentially too.

‡ If you have been well taken care of by life, if you have gotten your fill, leave it satisfied.

‡ *Cur non ut plenus uita conuiuia recedis?*

‡ If you have not known what to do with it, if it was useless to you, why should you care about losing it? What more do you need it for?

‡ *Cur amplius addere quaeris,
Rursum quod pereat male, et ingratum occidat omne?*

‡ Life itself is neither good nor evil. It is where good and evil stay, for as long as you let them.

‡ And if you have lived a day, you have seen everything. One day equals any other day. There is no other daytime, no other nighttime. This sun, this moon, these stars, this constellation, they are the very same ones your ancestors enjoyed and the same ones that will sustain your great-grandchildren.

‡ *Non alium uidere patres, aliumue nepotes
Aspicient.*

‡ All the acts of my play, many and varied though they are, are completed in a year. If you have paid attention to the whirl of my four seasons, they include the childhood, adolescence, maturity, and old age of the world. It has played its part and knows no other trick but to start again. It will always be the same.

‡ *Uersamur ibidem, atque insumus usque.*

‡ *Atque in se sua per uestigia uoluitur annus.*

‡ I have no intention to craft new ways for you to pass the time.

Mortals live together and, like runners, pass on the torch of life to one another. • LUCR., 2.76

The first hour that gave us life chipped away at it. • SEN., HF., 3.874

As we are born, we die. The end hangs off the beginning. • MANILIUS, 4.14

Why not leave life like a sated dinner guest? • LUCR., 3.931

Why seek to have more time when all of it will again be spent in vain and be cut short? • LUCR., 3.941

Your fathers saw none other, nor will your grandchildren look at anything different. • MANILIUS, 1.529

We go round and round, always in the same circle. • LUCR., 3.1080

And the year rolls around on its own track. • VERG., G., 2.402

*a Nam tibi praeterea quod machiner, inueniamque
Quod placeat, nihil est, eadem sunt omnia semper.*

There is nothing else I can invent or find to please you. All things are the same forever. • LUCR., 3.944

a Make way for others as others have done for you. *c* Equity begins with equality. Who would complain of being included when all others are included too?

a Live as long as you want, you can never knock any time off your death. It makes no difference. You will spend as much time in this state you fear as you would had you died an infant:

*a licet quot uis uiuendo uincere secla,
Mors aeterna tamen nihilo minus illa manebit.*

Live as long as you wish, prevail over every age, everlasting death alone remains undefeated. • LUCR., 3.1090

b I will even make it so you feel no discontent.

*b In uera nescis nullum fore morte alium te,
Qui possit uiuus tibi te lugere peremptum,
Stansque iacentem.¹⁷*

You do not realize that, once dead, there will be no other you that can be alive to stand by your corpse and mourn you. • LUCR., 3.885

b Neither will you crave this life you complain about so much.

*b Nec sibi enim quisquam tum se uitamque requirit.
Nec desiderium nostri nos afficit ullum*

No one misses one's life. We do not long for ourselves. • LUCR., 3.919
AND 3.922

b Death is less than nothing to fear, if something less than nothing even existed.

*b Multo mortem minus ad nos esse putandum,
Si minus esse potest, quam quod nihil esse videmus.*

Death is much less than what we imagine it to be—if something could be less than what we see to be nothing. • LUCR., 3.926

c Dead or alive, it concerns you not. Alive, because you are; dead, because you are no more.

a Also, no one dies before their time. The time you gave up is no more yours than the time before your birth; *b* it affects you just as little.

*b Respice enim, quam nil ad nos anteacta uetustas
Temporis aeterni fuerit.*

Indeed consider how the eternity of ancient times gone by was nothing to us. • LUCR., 3.972

a Wherever your life ends, all of it is there. *c* Life is worth not its extent but its use. Some lived little who lived a long while. Pay attention to life while you live yours. Whether you have lived enough depends on your will, not on a number of years. *a* Did you think you would never arrive where you were always going? *c* But all paths lead somewhere!

a And while company may ease your burden, is the world not going where you are going too?

a omnia te, uita perfuncta, sequentur.

All things will follow you when their time comes. • LUCR., 3.968

a Is everything not dancing the same dance as you? Is something not aging just as you are? A thousand people, a thousand animals, and a thousand other creatures die at the exact moment you die.

¶ *Nam nox nulla diem, neque noctem aurora sequuta est,
Quae non audierit mistos uagitibus aegris
Ploratus, mortis comites et funeris atri.*

No night has ever followed a day,
nor dawn ever followed a night, in
which the cries of newborns are
not heard together with the
sorrowful wailing of deaths and
funerals. • LUCR., 2.578

« Why march backward toward death when there is nothing to hold back? You know of enough cases of people for whom dying was a good thing, being spared great misery by it. Have you ever known anyone for whom it was bad? (How very foolish to condemn something you have experienced neither yourself nor through someone else!) Why do you complain about me and about fate? Did we do you wrong? Is it for you to govern us or for us to govern you? No matter how old you are, your life is complete. A short person is as whole as a tall one.

« Neither people nor their lives ought to be measured in yards. Chiron turned down immortality when the god of time and duration, Saturn himself, his father, informed him of what it entailed. Indeed, imagine how much less bearable, and more tedious, everlasting life would be to humanity compared to the life I gave it. If you did not have death, you would curse me constantly for having deprived you of it. Seeing how easily one can make use of it, I deliberately added some harshness to it, to prevent you from embracing it too avidly and indiscriminately. And so that you would adopt this moderation I ask of you, neither to leave life nor to run away from death, I added to one and the other bitterness and sweetness.

« I taught Thales, foremost among the wise, that living and dying was a matter of indifference. Which is why he replied, very wisely, to someone who had asked him why he did not die: "Because it is indifferent."

« Water, earth, air, fire, and all the other parts of this work of mine are instruments of your life as much as of your death. Why do you fear your final day? It contributes no more to your death than any of the others. The last step does not cause tiredness; it announces it. Every day leads to death; the last one gets there."

^a These are our Mother Nature's wise admonitions.¹⁸ Nevertheless, I have often wondered why it is that the face of death, whether we see it in others or in ourselves, seems incomparably less terrifying in wars than in our homes. (We would have an army of doctors and crybabies otherwise.) Also, since death is always one and the same, why do country folks and people from the lower classes show so much more confidence then? In truth, more than death itself, I think it is the eerie demeanor and ceremonies with which we surround it that frighten us. A whole new way of behaving; mothers, wives, and children wailing; visitors, speechless and stunned; the help of pale and tearful footmen; a dark room; candles burning, our bedside besieged by doctors and preachers. In short, nothing but horror and fright around us. We are as good as dead and buried. Children are scared of their friends when they see them wearing masks. We are too. So let us unmask things and people. Once the mask is off, we will find under it that same death a footman or a simple maid faced not long ago without fear.¹⁹ Happy is the death that gives this lot no time to prepare.²⁰

NOTES

- 1 This line, *to philosophize is nothing more than to prepare for death*, is sometimes attributed to Montaigne himself when he is clearly paraphrasing Cicero (who was himself referencing Plato's *Phaedo*). Cicero wrote *Tota enim philosophorum vita ... commentatio mortis est*. The entire life of philosophers is indeed a study of death. (or *a preparation for death*). • CIC., TUSC., 1.30 Montaigne (re)uses the citation in *On Physiognomy*.
- 2 This is usually understood to be a reference to the following verse from Ecclesiastes: *I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live*.
- 3 The word *virtue* (*vertue* in French) comes from Latin *uirtūs*. Contemporary etymologies relate it to *uir* (man) but Cicero, Montaigne's source in this sentence, claims that it is derived from *uīs* (strength, vigor, energy).
- 4 According to Valerius Maximus
- 5 The Latin euphemism discussed is *uixit*, i.e. *he/she lived*. The French expression Montaigne is referring to, *feu ...*, which we translated *late ...*, is derived from Latin *fātum* (destiny). In their translations, both Donald Frame and M. A. Screech note that Montaigne might have believed that *feu* came from Latin *fuit* (he/she was).
- 6 In 1564, the Edict of Roussillon decreed that the year would begin, in France, on January 1st. Charles IX issued the edict to standardize the date of the new year which, until then, could vary from region to region. The edict started to be applied in 1567. With the following line, *Only fifteen days ago, I turned 39*, Montaigne provides us with one of the few direct indications of the time of composition of one of his essays. We see here that the first layer of chapter 20, layer A, is from late winter, early spring 1572.
- 7 Methuselah, a biblical patriarch who is said to have lived 969 years.
- 8 John II, Duke of Brittany, died at the coronation of Pope Clement V in 1305, in Lyon, when a wall crowded with spectators gathered to see the new pope collapsed on him. Clement V was born in 1264 in Villandraut, about 40 miles south of Montaigne's home.
- 9 Henry II, king of France, was mortally wounded in a joust in June 1559.
- 10 Philip, the eldest son of Louis VI of France, in 1131.
- 11 Similar lists of notable and bizarre deaths are found in other contemporary authors. Some of Montaigne's French, Italian, and classical examples are found in Jean Tixier de Ravisi and in Rabelais, for instance, and derived from Pliny, Valerius Maximus, and Tertullian.
- 12 This is Montaigne's second youngest brother, Arnaud, who died around 1569. Tennis, or "real tennis" as the precursor to our modern game of

tennis is now called, became very popular in England and France at the turn of the 16th century.

- 13 From Plutarch's *Dinner of the Seven Wise Men*: "Now the skeleton which in Egypt they are wont, with fair reason, to bring in and expose at their parties, urging the guests to remember that what it is now, they soon shall be, although it is an ungracious and unseasonable companion to be introduced at a merry-making, yet has a certain timeliness, even if it does not incline the guests to drinking and enjoyment, but rather to a mutual friendliness and affection, and if it urges upon them that life, which is short in point of time, should not be made long by evil conduct." (translation Frank Cole Babbitt)

- 14 The "miserable king of Macedon" is Perseus, last king of the Antigonid dynasty, whom Lucius Aemilius Paulus defeated at the battle of Pydna, in 168 BCE. Plutarch, from whom the anecdote is taken, wrote: "Perseus had sent to Aemilius begging not to be led in the procession and asking to be left out of the triumph. But Aemilius, in mockery, as it would seem, of the king's cowardice and love of life, had said: 'But this at least was in his power before, and is so now, if he should wish it,' signifying death in preference to disgrace...." (translation Bernadotte Perrin)

- 15 Herodotus wrote, in *The Histories*: "After rich men's repasts, a man carries around an image in a coffin, painted and carved in exact imitation of a corpse two or four feet long. This he shows to each of the company, saying 'While you drink and enjoy, look on this; for to this state you must come when you die.' Such is the custom at their symposia." (translation A. D. Godley)

- 16 This passage is an example of a significant difference between the *Bordeaux Copy* (Montaigne's handwritten notes for a revised edition of the *Essays* written on a printed copy of his book) and the text edited by Marie de Gournay shortly after his death. Her text — the canonical version of the *Essays* until the beginning of the 19th century — has: *Si j'estoy faiseur de livres, je feroys un registre commenté des morts diverses, qui apprendroit les hommes à mourir, leur apprendroit à vivre*. If I were a maker of books, I would put together a catalog, with commentaries, of various deaths, which would teach men how to die, would teach them how to live. However, by consulting the *Bordeaux Copy*, later editors determined that Montaigne had inserted a period, not a comma, between *diverses* and *qui*, turning the relative clause into an independent one: *They who would teach....*

- 17 The original quote is in the third person: *He does not realize....* Montaigne adapts it here, as he often does, to better fit his own text.

- 18 Much of this long passage, which began with *(Nature) says: Leave this world as you entered it*, and ends here, is inspired by and borrows from the end of the third book of Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things*.

- 19 The image of the footman and the maid facing death without fear is taken from Seneca's *Epistles*: *Mors es, quam nuper servus meus, quam ancilla contempsit*. Ah! thou art naught but Death, whom only yesterday a manservant of mine and a maid-servant did despise! • SEN., EP., 24.14 (translation Richard M. Gummere)

- 20 Montaigne ends this long chapter with a playful and telling return to one of its very first words. He began by stating that, according to Cicero, the purpose of philosophy is *to prepare for death* (s'apprester à la mort). He closes by saying that a happy death will give one's family members, servants, doctors, and priests *no time to prepare* (oste le loisir aux apprests de tel equipage). See Brody 1982, 118. The scene Montaigne paints of a long, public death, at home, "besieged" by all these characters reflects what many in 16th-century Europe would have expected and experienced. No modern painkillers and little privacy then. Moreover, much of the public attention paid to the dying at the time was meant to ensure they received the last rites. Therefore, Montaigne's final statement about a quick and private death had serious implications about the salvation of his soul, which contemporary readers would have recognized.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Caes., BGall.	Caesar, <i>Gallic War</i>
Catull.	Catullus, <i>Poems</i>
Cic., Fin.	Cicero, <i>On Ends</i>
Cic., Tusc.	Cicero, <i>Tusculan Disputations</i>
Claud., Ruf.	Claudian, <i>Against Rufinus</i>
Diog. Laert.	Diogenes Laërtius, <i>Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers</i>
Hdt.	Herodotus, <i>Histories</i>
Hor., Carm.	Horace, <i>Odes</i>
Hor., Epist.	Horace, <i>Epistles</i>
Lucr.	Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i>
Manilius	Manilius, <i>Astronomica</i>
Max., El.	Maximianus, <i>Elegies</i>
Eccles.	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>
Ov., Am.	Ovid, <i>Amores</i>
Plut., Aem.	Plutarch, <i>Parallel Lives - Aemilius Paulus</i>
Plut., Conv. sept. sap.	Plutarch, <i>Moralia - Dinner of the Seven Wise Men</i>
Prop.	Propertius, <i>Elegies</i>

MONTAIGNE · ESSAYS

Sen., Ep.	Seneca, <i>Epistles</i>
Sen., HF.	Seneca, <i>Hercules Furens</i>
Sil., Pun.	Silius Italicus, <i>Punica</i>
Val. Max.	Valerius Maximus, <i>Memorable Deeds and Sayings</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>
Verg., G.	Virgil, <i>Georgics</i>