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# Discourse on Voluntary Servitude

Étienne De La Boétie

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1548

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my part, I am convinced, and am not mistaken in this conviction (since nothing is more contrary to the free and gracious nature of God than tyranny is) that he has a place in hell where tyrants and their accomplices undergo some torment reserved especially for them.

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strive night and day to please is the one you fear more than any other. And at every moment your eyes and ears must be open, to anticipate the blow, to see the traps people are laying for you, to weigh up what someone's expression signifies, to know who your betrayer is, to smile at everyone and yet fear them all, to have no avowed enemy or reliable friend, with a smile on your face and your heart numb with fear, always unable to feel any joy, yet daring not to be sad.

But it is pleasurable to consider what benefit they derive from the great trouble they put themselves to, and what they gain from their pitiful, tormented existence. People readily find someone to blame for their sufferings — and they do not blame the tyrant, but his advisers. The entire population of a whole nation, right down to the peasants and farm-laborers, will outbid each other in naming names, in denouncing these people for their vices, in heaping upon them a thousand insults, a thousand defamations, a thousand curses. The nation's every prayer is devoted to their downfall. They blame them for every misfortune, every outbreak of the plague, every famine. They may, on occasion, appear to be bestowing some recognition upon them, but it is then especially that their secret detestation of them is most heartfelt, that they feel more horror of them than of any wild beast. Such is the glory and renown these people gain from their service to the community: if their bodies were torn into as many pieces as there are citizens, people would feel that that did not compensate for the anguish they endured, that that only goes halfway to satisfying them. Furthermore, after their death, future generations never fail to blacken the name of these vultures in the ink of a thousand books, raking over their very bones, so to speak, and punishing them, even posthumously, for their wicked lives.

Come then, let us learn to act virtuously. Let us lift up our eyes towards heaven, for the sake of our honor or for love of virtue itself — or, more properly, for the love and honor of almighty God, who is assuredly a witness of our deeds and a just judge of our faults. For

spoils, as they are equals and companions; they have no love of each other, but they do fear each other, and do not want to reduce their security by becoming involved in disputes. But the favorites of a tyrant can have no such assurances about him, for they are the very people who have taught him that he is all powerful, and that he is bound by no law or duty, and that he may count his will as synonymous with reason, and that he had no peer, but is master of all. How lamentable, then, that with all these clear examples, and with the danger so close at hand, nobody deigns to learn from the mistakes of others! All of those people who so readily approach tyrants, not one is wise enough to tell them what the fox in the story said to the lion who was pretending to be ill: 'I would be glad to come see you in your lair. But I can see the footprints of many beasts going into your lair, but none coming out...'

These abject men see the glitter of the tyrant's gold and are mesmerized by the rays of his might: this is what dazzles and incites them, and they draw nigh, not noticing that they are walking into the flames which will assuredly consume them. In the same way, that reckless satyr of old saw the light of the torch that Prometheus discovered, and found it so appealing that he went to kiss it — and was burned by it, as the Tuscan poet says. Similarly, the butterfly, hoping to experience pleasure, is drawn into a flame by the attraction of the light — but experiences the flames other quality, and is burned by it. But even supposing these sycophants escape the clutches of their master, there is no escaping his successor. If he is a virtuous man, then the day of reckoning is at hand and they have to come to terms with reason. If, like their present master, he is a wicked man, he will most certainly have his own favorites, and these people are not usually content to take over other people's offices, they usually demand their possession and their lives as well. So will anyone be willing to take on that wretched task of serving such a dangerous master, a task which can be only carried out with great anguish and at great peril, and with such little confidence? What anguish, what martyrdom! Good God! The man you

## Anti-Dictator

*I see no good in having several lords;  
Let one alone be master, let one alone be king.*

These words Homer puts in the mouth of Ulysses,<sup>1</sup> as he addresses the people. If he had said nothing further than "I see no good in having several lords," it would have been well spoken. For the sake of logic he should have maintained that the rule of several could not be good since the power of one man alone, as soon as he acquires the title of master, becomes abusive and unreasonable. Instead he declared what seems preposterous: "Let one alone be master, let one alone be king." We must not be critical of Ulysses, who at the moment was perhaps obliged to speak these words in order to quell a mutiny in the army, for this reason, in my opinion, choosing language to meet the emergency rather than the truth. Yet, in the light of reason, it is a great misfortune to be at the beck and call of one master, for it is impossible to be sure that he is going to be kind, since it is always in his power to be cruel whenever he pleases. As for having several masters, according to the number one has, it amounts to being that many times unfortunate. Although I do not wish at this time to discuss this much debated question, namely whether other types of government are preferable to monarchy,<sup>2</sup> still I should like to know, before casting doubt on the place that monarchy should occupy among commonwealths, whether or not it belongs to such a group, since it is hard to believe

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<sup>1</sup> *Iliad*, Book II, Lines 204–205.

<sup>2</sup> Government by a single ruler. From the Greek *monos* (single) and *arkhein* (to command).

that there is anything of common wealth in a country where everything belongs to one master. This question, however, can remain for another time and would really require a separate treatment involving by its very nature all sorts of political discussion.

For the present I should like merely to understand how it happens that so many men, so many villages, so many cities, so many nations, sometimes suffer under a single tyrant who has no other power than the power they give him; who is able to harm them only to the extent to which they have the willingness to bear with him; who could do them absolutely no injury unless they preferred to put up with him rather than contradict him.<sup>3</sup> Surely a striking situation! Yet it is so common that one must grieve the more and wonder the less at the spectacle of a million men serving in wretchedness, their necks under the yoke, not constrained by a greater multitude than they, but simply, it would seem, delighted and charmed by the name of one man alone whose power they need not fear, for he is evidently the one person whose qualities they cannot admire because of his inhumanity and brutality toward them. A weakness characteristic of human kind is that we often have to obey force; we have to make concessions; we ourselves cannot always be the stronger. Therefore, when a nation is constrained by the fortune of war to serve a single clique, as happened when the city of Athens served the thirty Tyrants,<sup>4</sup> one should not be amazed that the nation obeys, but simply be grieved by the situation; or rather, instead of being amazed or saddened, consider patiently the evil and look forward hopefully toward a happier future.

Our nature is such that the common duties of human relationship occupy a great part of the course of our life. It is reasonable to love virtue, to esteem good deeds, to be grateful for good from

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<sup>3</sup> At this point begins the text of the long fragment published in the *Reveille-Matin des Français*. See Introduction, p. xvii.

<sup>4</sup> An autocratic council of thirty magistrates that governed Athens for eight months in 404 B.C. They exhibited such monstrous despotism that the city rose in anger and drove them forth.

anyone other than the man she had given life to. What man was ever more gullible, more naive, or — to put it more accurately — more complete a fool than emperor Claudius? Who was ever more infatuated with a woman than he was with Messalina? He ended by handing her over to the executioner. If tyrants are naive, that naivety always prevents them doing any good. But whatever wit they do have, however little, is eventually spurred into action when it comes to exercising cruelty, especially against those in their entourage. Everyone knows that nice saying of the other tyrant who stroked the bare neck of that wife whom he most loved, and without whom it seemed he could not go on living, with the fine words, ‘This beautiful neck will be cut one day, if I but give the word’. That is why most ancient tyrants were killed by their closest favorites who, knowing the nature of tyranny, trusted the will of the tyrant less than they mistrusted his power. Thus, Domitian was killed by Stephanus, Commodus by one of his own mistresses, Antoninus by Macrinus — and the same thing happened with almost all the others.

There is no doubt that the tyrant is never loved, and loves nobody. Friendship is a sacred word, it is a holy thing, and it exists only between good people, it is kindled by mutual esteem. It is sustained not so much by favors as by a good life. What gives you confidence you can rely on a friend is the knowledge you have his integrity: the guarantors of that are his natural virtue, his trustworthiness and his constancy. Where there is cruelty, treachery and injustice there can be no friendship. Evil men are not companions of one another, they are conspirators. They have no mutual affection, but a mutual fear: they are not friends, but accomplices.

Now even if that consideration were not an obstacle, it would still be difficult to establish solid friendship with a tyrant. The reason is that he is above all other men, and has no peer, and so he is necessarily beyond the bounds of friendship, which is all about equality: you do not want a relationship which limps. That is why they say thieves trust each other when it comes to dividing the

experience that cruelty of the tyrant which they had previously kindled against others. Usually, by having enriched themselves by using the tyrant's protection to despoil others, they enriched the tyrant with what he despoiled from them.

It sometimes happens that good men gain the favor of a tyrant. But, though these men may advance far in the tyrant's good graces, and though virtue and integrity may shine brightly within them (and these are qualities which even wicked men revere when they observe them at close hand), these good men cannot survive in the company of the tyrant and, like everyone else, they see their plans obstructed by tyranny. Take the case of Seneca, Burrus and Thrasea, a trio of good men: through ill-fortune, two of them became part of the entourage of the tyrant, who esteemed and cherished them, and made them responsible for the government of affairs; and the third had been responsible for his education, a fact which was the pledge of the friendship he enjoyed with the tyrant. But the cruel deaths endured by these three shows clearly how little faith can be placed in the favor of an evil master. And indeed, what friendship can one expect of a man who is so hard-hearted as to hate his kingdom when it is doing nothing but obeying him, and who, because he does not know where his own true interests lie, impoverishes himself and destroys his own power?

Now if you argue that these people received this ill-treatment because they acted virtuously towards the tyrant, then take a good look at that man's whole entourage, and you will see that those who ingratiated themselves with him and kept his favor by evil means lasted no longer. Who has ever heard or read of a love as precipitate, an affection as stubborn, an infatuation as obstinate as his for Poppaea? Well, he later poisoned her. His mother, Agrippina, had killed her husband Claudius to allow him to become emperor, never shrinking from any action, and hardship which would benefit him. Well, her very son, her offspring, the man she had handed the empire to, let her down many times and finally took her life. Everyone said she richly deserved to have life taken from her — by

whatever source we may receive it, and, often, to give up some of our comfort in order to increase the honor and advantage of some man whom we love and who deserves it. Therefore, if the inhabitants of a country have found some great personage who has shown rare foresight in protecting them in an emergency, rare boldness in defending them, rare solicitude in governing them, and if, from that point on, they contract the habit of obeying him and depending on him to such an extent that they grant him certain prerogatives, I fear that such a procedure is not prudent, inasmuch as they remove him from a position in which he was doing good and advance him to a dignity in which he may do evil. Certainly while he continues to manifest good will one need fear no harm from a man who seems to be generally well disposed.

But O good Lord! What strange phenomenon is this? What name shall we give to it? What is the nature of this misfortune? What vice is it, or, rather, what degradation? To see an endless multitude of people not merely obeying, but driven to servility? Not ruled, but tyrannized over? These wretches have no wealth, no kin, nor wife nor children, not even life itself that they can call their own. They suffer plundering, wantonness, cruelty, not from an army, not from a barbarian horde, on account of whom they must shed their blood and sacrifice their lives, but from a single man; not from a Hercules nor from a Samson, but from a single little man. Too frequently this same little man is the most cowardly and effeminate in the nation, a stranger to the powder of battle and hesitant on the sands of the tournament; not only without energy to direct men by force, but with hardly enough virility to bed with a common woman! Shall we call subjection to such a leader cowardice? Shall we say that those who serve him are cowardly and faint-hearted? If two, if three, if four, do not defend themselves from the one, we might call that circumstance surprising but nevertheless conceivable. In such a case one might be justified in suspecting a lack of courage. But if a hundred, if a thousand endure the caprice of a single man, should we not rather say that they lack not the courage but the de-

sire to rise against him, and that such an attitude indicates indifference rather than cowardice? When not a hundred, not a thousand men, but a hundred provinces, a thousand cities, a million men, refuse to assail a single man from whom the kindest treatment received is the infliction of serfdom and slavery, what shall we call that? Is it cowardice? Of course there is in every vice inevitably some limit beyond which one cannot go. Two, possibly ten, may fear one; but when a thousand, a million men, a thousand cities, fail to protect themselves against the domination of one man, this cannot be called cowardly, for cowardice does not sink to such a depth, any more than valor can be termed the effort of one individual to scale a fortress, to attack an army, or to conquer a kingdom. What monstrous vice, then, is this which does not even deserve to be called cowardice, a vice for which no term can be found vile enough, which nature herself disavows and our tongues refuse to name?

Place on one side fifty thousand armed men, and on the other the same number; let them join in battle, one side fighting to retain its liberty, the other to take it away; to which would you, at a guess, promise victory? Which men do you think would march more gallantly to combat — those who anticipate as a reward for their suffering the maintenance of their freedom, or those who cannot expect any other prize for the blows exchanged than the enslavement of others? One side will have before its eyes the blessings of the past and the hope of similar joy in the future; their thoughts will dwell less on the comparatively brief pain of battle than on what they may have to endure forever, they, their children, and all their posterity. The other side has nothing to inspire it with courage except the weak urge of greed, which fades before danger and which can never be so keen, it seems to me, that it will not be dismayed by the least drop of blood from wounds. Consider the justly famous

they must hang on his every word, his tone of voice, his gestures, his expression; their every faculty must be alert to catch his wishes and to discern his thoughts. Is that a happy existence? Can that be called living? Is there anything in the world less tolerable than that? And I do not mean less tolerable to a man of valor, a man of natural goodness, but simply endowed to a man with common sense, or just someone who has the appearance of a man? What way of life is more abject than one bereft of possessions, in which one's comfort, liberty, body and life depend on someone else?

But the goal of their servitude is wealth. As though they could gain anything which would belong to them, since they cannot even claim that they belong to themselves, as though anyone could own anything beneath a tyrant! They seek great possessions, but forget that it is they who give the tyrant the power to take everything from everyone, leaving nothing which can be said to be owned by any individual. They see that it is possessions alone which make men subject to the tyrant's cruelty, that in his eyes wealth is the only capital crime, that his only love is riches and that it is the rich man alone whom he brings down — and yet they come and present themselves before the butcher, as it were, and offer themselves to him nicely fattened up, to incite his appetite! These courtiers ought to forget those who enriched themselves in the entourage of tyrants, and remember those who amassed wealth for a time but ended up losing wealth and life. They ought to reflect not on how many other people have gained wealth that way, but on how few of them who have kept it. Just look at the whole of history, just contemplate what has happened within living memory, and it will be evident how many people there are who, having gained the ear of monarchs by evil means, exploiting their wickedness or naivety, have ended up being destroyed by them, and have discovered that the ease with which monarchs elevated them was equaled by the fickleness with which they brought them down. There is no doubt that among the vast number of courtiers of so many wicked kings, there have been few, scarcely any in fact, who did not themselves



piracy, and which, in exchange, gained from receiving the stolen goods.

In this way the tyrant has his subjects impose servitude upon each other, and is protected by those very people whom he ought to guard against, were they not utterly worthless. As the saying goes, you split wood with a wedge of wood. These men, condemned and abandoned by God and man, are the bodyguards, the archers, the sentries which the tyrant uses. It is true that they too suffer at his hands, but they are content to endure ill-treatment themselves — not upon the man who inflicts it upon them, but on people who are enduring it like themselves and who can do nothing at all about it. All the same, when I see those people debasing themselves for the tyrant so that they can derive some benefit from his tyranny and from the slavery he imposes upon the population, my reaction is usually amazement at their wickedness and often pity at their stupidity. For if the truth be told, to approach the tyrant is surely to retreat from one's liberty and, so to speak, to grasp servitude with both hands and embrace it? If they were to set aside their ambition a little, and to shed some of their avarice, and to reflect upon themselves and know themselves as they are, they would realize that the peasants, those rustic folk whom they do their very best to trample underfoot, and whom they treat worse than convicts or slaves, are fortunate in comparison with them, and have a kind of freedom, even though they are badly treated.

The farm laborer and the artisan are in a state of servitude, and have to do what they are told, but that is where it ends. But the courtiers of a tyrant ingratiate themselves with him and beg favors of him, and the tyrant, seeing this, requires them not just to do what he says but to think the way he wants them to and, often, to anticipate his desires. It is not enough that these people obey him, they must also please him in every way, they must endure hardship, torment themselves and drive themselves to the grave in carrying out his business; his pleasure must be their pleasure, his taste must be theirs, they must distort and cast off their natural disposition,

battles of Miltiades,<sup>5</sup> Leonidas,<sup>6</sup> Themistocles,<sup>7</sup> still fresh today in recorded history and in the minds of men as if they had occurred but yesterday, battles fought in Greece for the welfare of the Greeks and as an example to the world. What power do you think gave to such a mere handful of men not the strength but the courage to withstand the attack of a fleet so vast that even the seas were burdened, and to defeat the armies of so many nations, armies so immense that their officers alone outnumbered the entire Greek force? What was it but the fact that in those glorious days this struggle represented not so much a fight of Greeks against Persians as a victory of liberty over domination, of freedom over greed?

It amazes us to hear accounts of the valor that liberty arouses in the hearts of those who defend it; but who could believe reports of what goes on every day among the inhabitants of some countries, who could really believe that one man alone may mistreat a hundred thousand and deprive them of their liberty? Who would credit such a report if he merely heard it, without being present to witness the event? And if this condition occurred only in distant lands and were reported to us, which one among us would not assume the tale to be imagined or invented, and not really true? Obviously there is no need of fighting to overcome this single tyrant, for he is automatically defeated if the country refuses consent to its own enslavement: it is not necessary to deprive him of anything, but simply to give him nothing; there is no need that the country make an effort to do anything for itself provided it does nothing against itself. It is therefore the inhabitants themselves who permit, or, rather, bring about, their own subjection, since by ceasing to submit they would put an end to their servitude. A people en-

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<sup>5</sup> Athenian general, died 489 B.C. Some of his battles: expedition against Scythians; Lemnos; Imbros; Marathon, where Darius the Persian was defeated.

<sup>6</sup> King of Sparta, died at Thermopylae in 480 B.C., defending the pass with three hundred loyal Spartans against Xerxes.

<sup>7</sup> Athenian statesman and general, died 460 B.C. Some of his battles: expedition against Aegean Isles; victory over Persians under Xerxes at Salamis.

slaves itself, cuts its own throat, when, having a choice between being vassals and being free men, it deserts its liberties and takes on the yoke, gives consent to its own misery, or, rather, apparently welcomes it. If it cost the people anything to recover its freedom, I should not urge action to this end, although there is nothing a human should hold more dear than the restoration of his own natural right, to change himself from a beast of burden back to a man, so to speak. I do not demand of him so much boldness; let him prefer the doubtful security of living wretchedly to the uncertain hope of living as he pleases. What then? If in order to have liberty nothing more is needed than to long for it, if only a simple act of the will is necessary, is there any nation in the world that considers a single wish too high a price to pay in order to recover rights which it ought to be ready to redeem at the cost of its blood, rights such that their loss must bring all men of honor to the point of feeling life to be unendurable and death itself a deliverance?

Everyone knows that the fire from a little spark will increase and blaze ever higher as long as it finds wood to burn; yet without being quenched by water, but merely by finding no more fuel to feed on, it consumes itself, dies down, and is no longer a flame. Similarly, the more tyrants pillage, the more they crave, the more they ruin and destroy; the more one yields to them, and obeys them, by that much do they become mightier and more formidable, the readier to annihilate and destroy. But if not one thing is yielded to them, if, without any violence they are simply not obeyed, they become naked and undone and as nothing, just as, when the root receives no nourishment, the branch withers and dies.

To achieve the good that they desire, the bold do not fear danger; the intelligent do not refuse to undergo suffering. It is the stupid and cowardly who are neither able to endure hardship nor to vindicate their rights; they stop at merely longing for them, and lose through timidity the valor roused by the effort to claim their rights, although the desire to enjoy them still remains as part of their nature. A longing common to both the wise and the foolish, to brave

is required. They carry out so many other evil deeds that they are only able to stay in office and exempt themselves from the laws and get out of trouble thanks to the protection of those above them. After that, you have a great crowd of other people, and anyone who unravels this thread will see that it is not just six thousand who are connected to the tyrant, but hundreds of thousands, millions. And the tyrant makes use of this cord. It is like the chain which, according to Homer, Jupiter has, and which he boasts would draw all the other gods to him if he pulled it. This is the explanation of Julius's expansion of the Senate, for the establishment of public offices, the creation of new state posts — not, you understand, to reform the administration of justice, but to provide new pillars of tyranny.

The result of these favors and advantages passed on is that you have almost as many people who seem to be profiting from tyranny as you do who would appreciate liberty. Doctors say that when an additional disease afflicts a body which is already sick, the new disease immediately joins forces with the existing ill: in the same way, as soon as a king has shown himself to be a tyrant, all the evil men, all the dregs of society, all the thieves and villains who are afflicted with burning ambition and wicked avarice, assemble around him and support him, so as to have their share in the booty and become little tyrants beneath the principle one. These are people who, in a republic, would have very little influence for good or ill. Great thieves and pirates do just the same: some spy out the land, others rob travelers, some lay ambushes, others are lookouts, others murder and despoil people, and although you do have a hierarchy among them, and some are just servants and the other bosses, they all gain some benefit, if not from the robbery itself but from the plotting of it. It has indeed been pointed out that the problem about the Cilician pirates was just not that they were so numerous that Pompey the Great had to be sent out against them, but that they made allies of several fine towns and great cities whose harbors provided them with shelter when they were returning from their

digressed, tyrants have always sought to buttress their position by accustoming the people not just to obedience and servitude, but also to religious devotion to them.

Clearly, what I have said so far about ways in which tyrants make people more willing to accept servitude applies almost exclusively to the unthinking masses. But now I come to a point which is in my view the secret source of the power of tyrants, the very basis and foundation of that power. Anyone who imagines that tyrants are protected by halberds, by guards, by sentries, is in my view profoundly mistaken. Tyrants make use of such means, it seems to me, more as a formality, and to frighten people, than because they think they are effective. The king's archers can prevent badly dressed-people from getting into the palace — but these people are not the sort who are going to be able to do any harm. They cannot keep out well-armed men. — who are just the people to carry out some dangerous enterprise. Indeed, a quick count shows there are far fewer Roman emperors who escaped danger from the help of their guards than there are whom were killed by the guards themselves. A tyrant is not protected by calvary or infantry, or by weapons. It may be hard to believe at first, but there is no doubt that this is true. There are always four or five men who keep the tyrant in power, who keep the country enslaved for him. There have always been five or six men who have had the ear of the tyrant, either because they ingratiated themselves with him or because they were summoned by him to be the accomplices of his cruelty, the companions of his pleasures, the panders to his vices, the partners in his thefts. These six men train their chief so well that he takes on their wickedness in addition to his own, simply through being their companion. These six men have beneath them six hundred others, and the six hundred have the same effect on the six as the six do on the tyrant. The six hundred have beneath them six thousand whom on whom they have conferred public offices, such a governing a province or handling public money: these men will provide for their avarice and cruelty, and will do what is required when it

men and to cowards, is this longing for all those things which, when acquired, would make them happy and contented. Yet one element appears to be lacking. I do not know how it happens that nature fails to place within the hearts of men a burning desire for liberty, a blessing so great and so desirable that when it is lost all evils follow thereafter, and even the blessings that remain lose taste and savor because of their corruption by servitude. Liberty is the only joy upon which men do not seem to insist; for surely if they really wanted it they would receive it. Apparently they refuse this wonderful privilege because it is so easily acquired.

Poor, wretched, and stupid peoples, nations determined on your own misfortune and blind to your own good! You let yourselves be deprived before your own eyes of the best part of your revenues; your fields are plundered, your homes robbed, your family heirlooms taken away. You live in such a way that you cannot claim a single thing as your own; and it would seem that you consider yourselves lucky to be loaned your property, your families, and your very lives. All this havoc, this misfortune, this ruin, descends upon you not from alien foes, but from the one enemy whom you yourselves render as powerful as he is, for whom you go bravely to war, for whose greatness you do not refuse to offer your own bodies unto death. He who thus domineers over you has only two eyes, only two hands, only one body, no more than is possessed by the least man among the infinite numbers dwelling in your cities; he has indeed nothing more than the power that you confer upon him to destroy you. Where has he acquired enough eyes to spy upon you, if you do not provide them yourselves? How can he have so many arms to beat you with, if he does not borrow them from you? The feet that trample down your cities, where does he get them if they are not your own? How does he have any power over you except through you? How would he dare assail you if he had no cooperation from you? What could he do to you if you yourselves did not connive with the thief who plunders you, if you were not accomplices of the murderer who kills you, if you were not traitors to

yourselves? You sow your crops in order that he may ravage them, you install and furnish your homes to give him goods to pillage; you rear your daughters that he may gratify his lust; you bring up your children in order that he may confer upon them the greatest privilege he knows — to be led into his battles, to be delivered to butchery, to be made the servants of his greed and the instruments of his vengeance; you yield your bodies unto hard labor in order that he may indulge in his delights and wallow in his filthy pleasures; you weaken yourselves in order to make him the stronger and the mightier to hold you in check. From all these indignities, such as the very beasts of the field would not endure, you can deliver yourselves if you try, not by taking action, but merely by willing to be free. Resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed. I do not ask that you place hands upon the tyrant to topple him over, but simply that you support him no longer; then you will behold him, like a great Colossus whose pedestal has been pulled away, fall of his own weight and break in pieces.

Doctors are no doubt correct in warning us not to touch incurable wounds; and I am presumably taking chances in preaching as I do to a people which has long lost all sensitivity and, no longer conscious of its infirmity, is plainly suffering from mortal illness. Let us therefore understand by logic, if we can, how it happens that this obstinate willingness to submit has become so deeply rooted in a nation that the very love of liberty now seems no longer natural.

In the first place, all would agree that, if we led our lives according to the ways intended by nature and the lessons taught by her, we should be intuitively obedient to our parents; later we should adopt reason as our guide and become slaves to nobody. Concerning the obedience given instinctively to one's father and mother, we are in agreement, each one admitting himself to be a model. As to whether reason is born with us or not, that is a question loudly discussed by academicians and treated by all schools of philosophers. For the present I think I do not err in stating that there is in our souls some native seed of reason, which, if nourished by

Our French writers propagated something similar to that — the story about the toads, the fluer-de-lys, the phial and the oriflamme. Whatever the truth is about that, I am reluctant to cast doubt on it, since neither we nor our ancestors have so far had any reason to disbelieve these stories, since our kings have always been virtuous in peacetime and valiant in war: even though they were born to kingship, it seems as though nature has made them different from other kings. They seem to have been chosen by almighty God, before birth, to govern and preserve this kingdom. And even if that were not the case, I still would not wish to enter the lists and debate the truth of our history, and scrutinize it so closely — that is a subject for our French poets to joust over. Indeed, our Ronsard, Baif, and Du Bellay have not just enriched French poetry, they have entirely renewed it, and they are conferring such status on our language that I dare to hope that before very long the only claim to pre-eminence the Greeks and Romans will have over us where poetry is concerned is that they came before us. And indeed it would be very wrong of me to deny to French verse (for I have no objection to using this word 'verse': many people have made verse merely mechanical, but there are others who are able to restore its old luster and nobility), it would be very wrong of me, I say, to seek to deprive it of those fine stories about king Clovis. In fact, we can readily see that Ronsard is going to make this subject his own, and that his *Franciade* will be a delightful poem. I know his talents, his sharp mind, the gracious way he expresses himself. He will make use of Clovis's oriflamme in the same way as the Romans did of their shields,

The shields from heaven earthwards hurled

as Virgil says. He will make the same use of the phial as the Athenians did of the basket of Erichthonius, and will make our insignia as renowned as our olive, which they say is still found today in the tower of Minerva. Clearly, I would be going too far if I set out to refute our French histories and encroach upon the territory of poets in this way. But to get back to the point from which I somehow

Alexandria on the way to Rome to seize the empire, worked miracles: he cured cripples, made blind people see, and carried out all sorts of other great deeds. Anyone unable to see what was bogus about all that was in my view blinder than the people he cured.

Even tyrants found it really strange that men could tolerate one who did them harm. They were very keen to use religion to protect them and, if possible, to appropriate some divine attribute to sustain their wicked way of life. Thus, if we are to believe the sybil whom Virgil introduces in his description of hell, Salmoneus is now paying the price for having deceived people by making out that he was Jupiter. The sybil saw him in the recesses of hell,

Suffering grievous woe, for claiming he had use  
Of thunder and of lightning, sole property of Zeus.  
Drawn by four fine horses, with brave, triumphant  
hand  
He brandished in the heavens a brightly flaming  
brand.  
In the market place at Elis he strutted through the  
crowd,  
Showing off before the Greeks, vain, arrogant and  
proud,  
And in his pompous progress he rashly laid a claim  
To the honor and the glory due solely to God's name:  
Mad fool, who did imagine that his mere bronze could  
fake  
The thunder and the lightning that no mere man can  
make!  
The vengeance of the deity was sure, and it came fast:  
The thunderbolt that struck him was no puny, mortal  
blast.

If this man who was simply acting the fool is getting the treatment he deserves in hell, I think there is even better reason why those who abuse religion to evil ends should finish up there....

good counsel and training, flowers into virtue, but which, on the other hand, if unable to resist the vices surrounding it, is stifled and blighted. Yet surely if there is anything in this world clear and obvious, to which one cannot close one's eyes, it is the fact that nature, handmaiden of God, governess of men, has cast us all in the same mold in order that we may behold in one another companions, or rather brothers. If in distributing her gifts nature has favored some more than others with respect to body or spirit, she has nevertheless not planned to place us within this world as if it were a field of battle, and has not endowed the stronger or the cleverer in order that they may act like armed brigands in a forest and attack the weaker. One should rather conclude that in distributing larger shares to some and smaller shares to others, nature has intended to give occasion for brotherly love to become manifest, some of us having the strength to give help to others who are in need of it. Hence, since this kind mother has given us the whole world as a dwelling place, has lodged us in the same house, has fashioned us according to the same model so that in beholding one another we might almost recognize ourselves; since she has bestowed upon us all the great gift of voice and speech for fraternal relationship, thus achieving by the common and mutual statement of our thoughts a communion of our wills; and since she has tried in every way to narrow and tighten the bond of our union and kinship; since she has revealed in every possible manner her intention, not so much to associate us as to make us one organic whole, there can be no further doubt that we are all naturally free, inasmuch as we are all comrades. Accordingly it should not enter the mind of anyone that nature has placed some of us in slavery, since she has actually created us all in one likeness.

Therefore it is fruitless to argue whether or not liberty is natural, since none can be held in slavery without being wronged, and in a world governed by a nature, which is reasonable, there is nothing so contrary as an injustice. Since freedom is our natural state, we are not only in possession of it but have the urge to defend it. Now,

if perchance some cast a doubt on this conclusion and are so corrupted that they are not able to recognize their rights and inborn tendencies, I shall have to do them the honor that is properly theirs and place, so to speak, brute beasts in the pulpit to throw light on their nature and condition. The very beasts, God help me! if men are not too deaf, cry out to them, "Long live Liberty!" Many among them die as soon as captured: just as the fish loses life as soon as he leaves the water, so do these creatures close their eyes upon the light and have no desire to survive the loss of their natural freedom. If the animals were to constitute their kingdom by rank, their nobility would be chosen from this type. Others, from the largest to the smallest, when captured put up such a strong resistance by means of claws, horns, beak, and paws, that they show clearly enough how they cling to what they are losing; afterwards in captivity they manifest by so many evident signs their awareness of their misfortune, that it is easy to see they are languishing rather than living, and continue their existence more in lamentation of their lost freedom than in enjoyment of their servitude. What else can explain the behavior of the elephant who, after defending himself to the last ounce of his strength and knowing himself on the point of being taken, dashes his jaws against the trees and breaks his tusks, thus manifesting his longing to remain free as he has been and proving his wit and ability to buy off the huntsmen in the hope that through the sacrifice of his tusks he will be permitted to offer his ivory as a ransom for his liberty? We feed the horse from birth in order to train him to do our bidding. Yet he is tamed with such difficulty that when we begin to break him in he bites the bit, he rears at the touch of the spur, as if to reveal his instinct and show by his actions that, if he obeys, he does so not of his own free will but under constraint. What more can we say?

"Even the oxen under the weight of the yoke complain,  
And the birds in their cage lament,"

formula they use — a formula which could be deployed with some subtlety, though usually their shamelessness excludes subtlety.

The kings of Assyria and, later, the kings of Medea, delayed appearing in public for as long as they could so that the people would begin to wonder whether they were in some respect more than mere mortals, and they allowed them to harbor this illusion (for people readily allow full reign to the imagination when they have no evidence of their own to go on). And so all those nations which for so long formed part of the Assyrian empire acquired the habit of slavery along with this mystery; and the fact that they did not know who their master was, and hardly knew whether they had one at all, made them all the more willing to be slaves. On the strength of hearsay, they all feared a man whom nobody had seen. The first kings of Egypt, when they appeared in public, almost invariably carried a cat or a branch, or had flames over their heads: the point of this farcical disguise was that it was strange, and would therefore induce a reverence and admiration in their subjects; had the people not been so stupid and so enslaved, this would simply have made them laugh. It is pitiful to hear of the variety of little tricks the ancient tyrants exploited to establish their tyrannies; from time immemorial, they found the people made the way they wanted them, ready to fall into the most clumsily-made trap, always so gullible that they were best enslaved when they were most profoundly mocked.

And what about that other little deception which ancient nations accepted as legal tender? They firmly believed that the big toe of Pyrrhus, king of the Epirotes, wrought miracles and cured people of sickness of the spleen. And they embellished the story, saying that this toe survived among the ashes when the rest of the body was cremated. This is how it always happens: the foolish people make up false stories, so that they can believe them. Many authors have related that story about Pyrrhus, but in a way that makes it clear they got it from rumor and the idle gossip of the populace. Vespasian, when he was returning from Ayssria and passing through

cept. Nowadays, when Nero is mentioned, everybody trembles at the very name of that vile monster, that foul scourge of mankind. And yet it can truthfully be said of that man — that arsonist, that butcher, that wild beast — that after his death (a death as sordid as his life), the noble people of Rome were so distressed when they thought of the games and banquets he had given them that they almost went into mourning. That fact is recorded by Cornelius Tacitus, a good, sound author and one of the most reliable. And that will not surprise anyone, when we consider how the Romans had responded earlier to the death of Julius Ceasar, who abolished liberty and the rule of law, and who seems to me to have been an utterly worthless man (for his clemency, even, which is so frequently extolled, was more harmful than the cruelty of the most savage tyrant who ever lived, as that venomous mildness of his was in reality the sugar-coating which made servitude acceptable to the Romans). After his death, the Romans, whose lips were still telling of his banquets and whose minds were still full of the memory of his prodigality, piled up the benches in the forum for a funeral pyre and raised a column for him bearing the inscription, ‘To the father of the nation’, and they bestowed more honor upon him, though he was dead, than they ought rightfully to have conferred on any mortal man — except possibly those who had killed him.

Another thing the Roman emperors did not overlook: many of them assumed the title of ‘Tribune of the people’. They did this partly because this office was held to be sacred and holy, and partly because it had been established for the defense and protection of the people. And in this way they exploited the constitution to ensure that the people would more readily trust them. They expected the people to pay more attention to the title than to their actions, which belied it. There are people nowadays who are little better: they accompany their anti-social measures, especially the major ones, with some fine preamble about the common good and betterment of the people. For you are very familiar, Longa, with the

as I expressed it some time ago, toying with our French poesy. For I shall not hesitate in writing to you, O Longa,<sup>8</sup> to introduce some of my verses, which I never read to you because of your obvious encouragement which is quite likely to make me conceited. And now, since all beings, because they feel, suffer misery in subjection and long for liberty; since the very beasts, although made for the service of man, cannot become accustomed to control without protest, what evil chance has so denatured man that he, the only creature really born to be free, lacks the memory of his original condition and the desire to return to it?

There are three kinds of tyrants; some receive their proud position through elections by the people, others by force of arms, others by inheritance. Those who have acquired power by means of war act in such wise that it is evident they rule over a conquered country. Those who are born to kingship are scarcely any better, because they are nourished on the breast of tyranny, suck in with their milk the instincts of the tyrant, and consider the people under them as their inherited serfs; and according to their individual disposition, miserly or prodigal, they treat their kingdom as their property. He who has received the state from the people, however, ought to be, it seems to me, more bearable and would be so, I think, were it not for the fact that as soon as he sees himself higher than the others, flattered by that quality which we call grandeur, he plans never to relinquish his position. Such a man usually determines to pass on to his children the authority that the people have conferred upon him; and once his heirs have taken this attitude, strange it is how far they surpass other tyrants in all sorts of vices, and especially in cruelty, because they find no other means to impose this new tyranny than by tightening control and removing their subjects so far from any notion of liberty that even if the memory of it is fresh it will soon be eradicated. Yet, to speak accurately, I do perceive that there is some difference among these

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<sup>8</sup> See Introduction, p. x.

three types of tyranny, but as for stating a preference, I cannot grant there is any. For although the means of coming into power differ, still the method of ruling is practically the same; those who are elected act as if they were breaking in bullocks; those who are conquerors make the people their prey; those who are heirs plan to treat them as if they were their natural slaves.

In connection with this, let us imagine some newborn individuals, neither acquainted with slavery nor desirous of liberty, ignorant indeed of the very words. If they were permitted to choose between being slaves and free men, to which would they give their vote? There can be no doubt that they would much prefer to be guided by reason itself than to be ordered about by the whims of a single man. The only possible exception might be the Israelites who, without any compulsion or need, appointed a tyrant.<sup>9</sup> I can never read their history without becoming angered and even inhuman enough to find satisfaction in the many evils that befell them on this account. But certainly all men, as long as they remain men, before letting themselves become enslaved must either be driven by force or led into it by deception; conquered by foreign armies, as were Sparta and Athens by the forces of Alexander<sup>10</sup> or by political factions, as when at an earlier period the control of Athens had passed into the hands of Pisistrates.<sup>11</sup> When they lose their liberty through deceit they are not so often betrayed by others as misled by themselves. This was the case with the people of Syracuse, chief city of Sicily (I am told the place is now named Saragossa<sup>12</sup>) when, in the throes of war and heedlessly planning only for the present

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<sup>9</sup> The reference is to Saul anointed by Samuel.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander the Macedonian became the acknowledged master of all Hellenes at the Assembly of Corinth, 335 B.C.

<sup>11</sup> Athenian tyrant, died 527 B.C. He used ruse and bluster to control the city and was obliged to flee several times.

<sup>12</sup> The name Syracuse is derived from Syracca, the marshland near which the city was founded. The author is misinformed about "Sarragousse," which is the Spanish Zaragoza, capital of Aragón.

of servitude as soon as the most transparent trick is played upon them. It is incredible how rapidly they let themselves be taken in, provided only that someone tickles them. Theaters, games, farces, spectacles, gladiators, strange beasts, medals, tableaux and other such drugs were the bait that lured ancient nations into servitude, they were the price at which freedom was sold, they were the instruments of tyranny: these were the methods, the procedures, the allurements which ancient tyrants could use to put their people to sleep, to place them under the yoke. Thus, these foolish people, finding these pastimes enjoyable, taken in by the idle pleasures which met their gaze, became accustomed to slavery: they were as gullible as little children who are induced to read by the colorful illustrations in books — but their gullibility is culpable.

The Roman tyrants hit upon another ploy: the frequent celebration of ten-day periods of public revelry. The common rabble is crying out to be exploited this way, for they delight in nothing more than gluttony. The most intelligent and perceptive among them would not be denied his bowl of soup even if it meant recovering the freedom of Plato's Republic. Tyrants used to hand out a quarter bushel of wheat, a flagon of wine and a couple of bronze coins, and straightway you would hear those abject cries, 'Long live the king!'. What these blockheads fail to understand was that they were simply getting back a part of what belonged to them, and that the tyrant would not have been able to give that back to them if he had not taken it from them in the first place. The self-same man who picks up the bronze coin one day and gorges himself in the public festival and sings the praises of Tiberius and Nero and their wonderful generosity is the man who, the following day, is obliged to abandon his possessions to the avarice of these magnificent emperors, to abandon his children to their lust and his very blood to their cruelty — and he is as silent as a stone, motionless as a tree-stump.

The common people have always been like that: totally open and dissolute in accepting pleasures which they ought not to ac-



killed a hundred of the enemy). But it is certain that the tyrant never reckons his power is secure until he has reached the stage when there is no man of valor beneath him. Hence, one can rightly put to him the reproach which Terence's Thraso claims to have put to the elephant trainer:

At government, you think you're clever:  
You govern beasts — but humans never.

But this ruse whereby tyrants reduce their subjects to the status of beasts is nowhere better illustrated than in the story of what Cyrus did to the Lydians after he had seized their principal city and captured its immensely wealthy king, Croesus, and taken him away as captive. News was brought to Cyrus of a revolt by the people of Sardis. He could have brought them to heel very quickly, but he did not wish either to have such a beautiful city sacked or to have to keep an army there to guard it, and so he hit upon a most expedient way of ensuring control of the city: he set up brothels there, and taverns, and public festivities, and issued a decree to the effect that all inhabitants were to patronize them. This garrison turned out to be so effective that he was never again obliged to draw his sword against the Lydians. These poor, miserable souls devoted themselves to inventing all sorts of games, with the result that the Romans took from them their word for games, and what we call pastimes they call "ludi", recalling 'Lydia'. Not all tyrants have explicitly declared, as he did, that it was their intention to make people effeminate, but there is no doubt that most of them pursued covertly a policy which this man decreed formally and publicly.

The truth is that ordinary folk, who always form the majority of then population in cities, are by nature suspicious of the man who loves them and credulous towards the man who deceives them. No bird more readily succumbs to deception, no fish snatches the bait more rapidly, than entire nations succumb to the blandishments

danger, they promoted Denis,<sup>13</sup> their first tyrant, by entrusting to him the command of the army, without realizing that they had given him such power that on his victorious return this worthy man would behave as if he had vanquished not his enemies but his compatriots, transforming himself from captain to king, and then from king to tyrant.

It is incredible how as soon as a people becomes subject, it promptly falls into such complete forgetfulness of its freedom that it can hardly be roused to the point of regaining it, obeying so easily and so willingly that one is led to say, on beholding such a situation, that this people has not so much lost its liberty as won its enslavement. It is true that in the beginning men submit under constraint and by force; but those who come after them obey without regret and perform willingly what their predecessors had done because they had to. This is why men born under the yoke and then nourished and reared in slavery are content, without further effort, to live in their native circumstance, unaware of any other state or right, and considering as quite natural the condition into which they were born. There is, however, no heir so spendthrift or indifferent that he does not sometimes scan the account books of his father in order to see if he is enjoying all the privileges of his legacy or whether, perchance, his rights and those of his predecessor have not been encroached upon. Nevertheless it is clear enough that the powerful influence of custom is in no respect more compelling than in this, namely, habituation to subjection. It is said that Mithridates<sup>14</sup> trained

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<sup>13</sup> Denis or Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse, died in 367 B.C. Of lowly birth, this dictator imposed himself by plottings, putsches, and purges. The danger from which he saved his city was the invasion by the Carthaginians.

<sup>14</sup> Mithridates (c. 135–63 B.C.) was next to Hannibal the most dreaded and potent enemy of Roman Power. The reference in the text is to his youth when he spent some years in retirement hardening himself and immunizing himself against poison. In his old age, defeated by Pompey, betrayed by his own son, he tried poison and finally had to resort to the dagger of a friendly Gaul. (Pliny, *Natural History*, XXIV, 2.)

himself to drink poison. Like him we learn to swallow, and not to find bitter, the venom of servitude. It cannot be denied that nature is influential in shaping us to her will and making us reveal our rich or meager endowment; yet it must be admitted that she has less power over us than custom, for the reason that native endowment, no matter how good, is dissipated unless encouraged, whereas environment always shapes us in its own way, whatever that may be, in spite of nature's gifts. The good seed that nature plants in us is so slight and so slippery that it cannot withstand the least harm from wrong nourishment; it flourishes less easily, becomes spoiled, withers, and comes to nothing. Fruit trees retain their own particular quality if permitted to grow undisturbed, but lose it promptly and bear strange fruit not their own when ingrafted. Every herb has its peculiar characteristics, its virtues and properties; yet frost, weather, soil, or the gardener's hand increase or diminish its strength; the plant seen in one spot cannot be recognized in another.

Whoever could have observed the early Venetians,<sup>15</sup> a handful of people living so freely that the most wicked among them would not wish to be king over them, so born and trained that they would not vie with one another except as to which one could give the best counsel and nurture their liberty most carefully, so instructed and developed from their cradles that they would not exchange for all the other delights of the world an iota of their freedom; who, I say, familiar with the original nature of such a people, could visit today the territories of the man known as the Great Doge, and there contemplate with composure a people unwilling to live except to serve him, and maintaining his power at the cost of their lives? Who would believe that these two groups of people had an identical origin? Would one not rather conclude that upon leaving a city

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<sup>15</sup> This passage probably suggested to Montaigne that his friend would have been glad to see the light in Venice. See *Essays*, Book I, Chapter XXVIII.

Greeks, and if he were to use his art in the service of a king who sought to reduce Greece to servitude. The letter he sent to the king has survived, and can be read along with his other works: it will be an eternal testimony to his great heart and noble nature. Now it is certain that when liberty is lost, valor is lost at the same time. The subjects of a king have no heart for combat or difficulty: they face danger with a servile and leaden soul, as it were, out of obligation, and feel nothing of that ardent love of freedom which has people despise peril and long to acquire honor and glory among their fellows by a good death. Free men strive in emulation with each other to work for the common good — and for their own good: they expect as individuals to have their share in the evils that come with defeat or the benefits that victory brings. But people who are slaves lose not just courage in war but also a vitality in all other things, and they have a lowly, effeminate heart which is incapable of great things. Tyrants know that very well, and when they see their subjects going in that direction, they encourage the process so as to make them more lethargic still.

Xenophon, one of the most authoritative of the Greek historians, wrote a book in which he has Hiero, tyrant of Syracuse, discuss the miseries of the tyrant. This book is full of sound and weighty warnings, and they are presented in the most pleasing style imaginable. Would to God that all tyrants had studied it carefully and used it as a mirror! They would most certainly recognize their scabs, and felt some shame for their warts. In this treatise, Xenophon related the troubles of tyrants who, because they do evil to all men, are obliged to fear all men. Among other things, he says that bad kings employ mercenary soldiers to fight their wars, since they do not dare put weapons in the hands of their own people whom they have harmed. (There have of course been good kings, especially French ones, who have employed foreigners, particularly in the past, but for another reason: to protect their own people, counting as nothing an expense which saves lives. It was the great Scipio Africanus, I think, who said that he would rather have saved one citizen than

deed: they were quite sure which side he was on, but not at all sure that he was brave enough.

And yet, the ancient annals offer anyone a clear historical lesson: of those people who have seen their country badly governed and have sought through good, honest motives to deliver it, have been unsuccessful. Liberty has always given herself a helping hand. Harmodius, Aristogiton, Thrasybulus, Brutus the Elder, Valerius and Dion were of courageous mind, and hence successful in their enterprises: Fortune almost never fails the virtuous. Brutus the Younger and Cassius were very successful in removing servitude, but restoring freedom cost them their lives. It would be wrong to say that they died wretchedly (it would be blasphemous to say there was anything wretched about those people, in death or in life!), but their deaths brought about untold harm, perpetual misfortune and the entire ruin of the state, which, it seems, was buried with them. Other, subsequent enterprises against Roman emperors were simply conspiracies of ambitious men, and we ought not to pity them for the price they paid, since it is clear that they set out not to remove kingship but to make a different man a king, and their aim was to drive out the tyrant whilst retaining tyranny. Even I would not have wanted these people to be successful, and I am glad that they show by their example that the holy name of liberty must not be abused for evil ends.

But to get back to the point that I had almost lost sight of, the first reason why people choose slavery is that they are born and brought up as serfs. This leads us to another reason, which is that under the rule of a tyrant, men easily become cowardly and effeminate. I am immeasurably grateful of Hippocrates, that great father of medicine, who observed the phenomenon and described it in a book of his titled *On Sickness*. This man certainly had his heart in the right place in every respect, a fact which he demonstrated when the king of Persia tried to attract him with great promises of gifts. He replied candidly, to the effect he would feel very guilty were he to take the job of curing those barbarians who aim to kill

of men he had chanced upon a menagerie of beasts? Lycurgus,<sup>16</sup> the lawgiver of Sparta, is reported to have reared two dogs of the same litter by fattening one in the kitchen and training the other in the fields to the sound of the bugle and the horn, thereby to demonstrate to the Lacedaemonians that men, too, develop according to their early habits. He set the two dogs in the open market place, and between them he placed a bowl of soup and a hare. One ran to the bowl of soup, the other to the hare; yet they were, as he maintained, born brothers of the same parents. In such manner did this leader, by his laws and customs, shape and instruct the Spartans so well that any one of them would sooner have died than acknowledge any sovereign other than law and reason.

It gives me pleasure to recall a conversation of the olden time between one of the favorites of Xerxes, the great king of Persia, and two Lacedaemonians. When Xerxes<sup>17</sup> equipped his great army to conquer Greece, he sent his ambassadors into the Greek cities to ask for water and earth. That was the procedure the Persians adopted in summoning the cities to surrender. Neither to Athens nor to Sparta, however, did he dispatch such messengers, because those who had been sent there by Darius his father had been thrown, by the Athenians and Spartans, some into ditches and others into wells, with the invitation to help themselves freely there to water and soil to take back to their prince. Those Greeks could not permit even the slightest suggestion of encroachment upon their liberty. The Spartans suspected, nevertheless, that they had incurred the wrath of the gods by their action, and especially

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<sup>16</sup> A half-legendary figure concerning whose life Plutarch admits there is much obscurity. He bequeathed to his land a rigid code regulating land, assembly, education, with the individual subordinate to the state.

<sup>17</sup> The Persian fleet and army under Xerxes or Ahasuerus set out from Sardis in 480 and were at first successful, even taking Athens and driving the Greeks to their last line of defense in the Bay of Salamis. Darius, the father of Xerxes, had made a similar incursion into Greece but was stopped at Marathon.

the wrath of Talthybios,<sup>18</sup> the god of the heralds; in order to appease him they decided to send to Xerxes two of their citizens in atonement for the cruel death inflicted upon the ambassadors of his father. Two Spartans, one named Sperte and the other Bulis, volunteered to offer themselves as a sacrifice. So they departed, and on the way they came to the palace of the Persian named Hydarnes, lieutenant of the king in all the Asiatic cities situated on the sea coasts. He received them with great honor, feasted them, and then, speaking of one thing and another, he asked them why they refused so obdurately his king's friendship. "Consider well, O Spartans," said he, "and realize by my example that the king knows how to honor those who are worthy, and believe that if you were his men he would do the same for you; if you belonged to him and he had known you, there is not one among you who might not be the lord of some Greek city."

"By such words, Hydarnes, you give us no good counsel," replied the Lacedaemonians, "because you have experienced merely the advantage of which you speak; you do not know the privilege we enjoy. You have the honor of the king's favor; but you know nothing about liberty, what relish it has and how sweet it is. For if you had any knowledge of it, you yourself would advise us to defend it, not with lance and shield, but with our very teeth and nails."

Only Spartans could give such an answer, and surely both of them spoke as they had been trained. It was impossible for the Persian to regret liberty, not having known it, nor for the Lacedaemonians to find subjection acceptable after having enjoyed freedom.

Cato the Utican,<sup>19</sup> while still a child under the rod, could come and go in the house of Sylla the despot. Because of the place and

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<sup>18</sup> The messenger and herald of Agamemnon in the *Iliad*.

<sup>19</sup> Marcus Porcius Cato, often called the Utican from the city where in 46 B.C., after reading the *Phaedo* of Plato, he ended his life. He was an uncompromising reformer and relentlessly attacked the vicious heirs to the power of Lucius Cornelius Sylla, the Roman dictator (136–78 B.C.). The Utican, born in 95 B.C., was only seventeen years old when Sylla died.

gitimize wrongdoing, it only aggravates the injury. But there are always some men who are more noble than others, who feel the weight of the yoke and cannot prevent themselves shaking it off, who will never be tame enough to accept subjugation. These men, like Ulysses (who, in all his travels, longed to see again the smoke from his own humble dwelling), will always remain aware of those privileges which Nature gave them, and will recall their original, ancestral state. These people, endowed with a clear mind and a visionary spirit, do not confine their gaze to what lies at their feet as the common run of humanity does), but readily look backward and forward, recalling past events so as to weigh up the present and judge the proper course for the future. These men were endowed with a good mind and have refined it by study and erudition: even if liberty were wiped off the face of the earth, these men would see it in their mind's eye, and have a feel for it, and savor it, and they would have no taste for servitude no matter how well it was dressed up.

The Sultan of Turkey realized that books and learning, more than anything else, give men the understanding and the wit to recognize those of their fellows who resist tyranny. I gather he hardly has any learned men in his territories, and has no desire that there should be any. Normally, people who have kept their devotion to freedom intact despite the passage of time are unable to make each other's acquaintance, and so their zealous longing for freedom remains ineffectual, however numerous they may be. Under a tyrant, they are denied freedom to act, to speak, almost even to think, so that those who hold these views are kept apart from each other. So Momus, the god of derision, was not far off the mark when he found fault with the man that Vulcan had made, on the grounds that he had not put a little window in his heart so that his thoughts would be visible. It has been said that when Brutus, Cassius and Casca set about delivering Rome from tyranny — or rather, delivering the whole world — they did not want Cicero, that zealous defender of the common good if ever there was one, to be a party to their action, and they considered he lacked the courage for such a noble

the facts would still speak for themselves, and you would certainly judge that the protagonist was a Roman, and born in Rome in the days when the city was free.

What point am I making here? I am certainly not saying that one's nationality and birthplace determine anything, since subjection is bitter and liberty is sweet wherever you happen to be. What I am saying is that one ought to pity those who find their neck in the yoke at birth. They ought to be excused or forgiven if they have not seen the shadow of liberty and have no inkling that it exists, and therefore do not realize what an evil they are enduring as slaves. Supposing there existed a land like the one Homer says the Cimmerii live in, where the sun shines continuously for six months and then leaves them slumbering in darkness during the other half-year: if those that were born during this long night had not heard of daylight, would it be surprising if they became accustomed to the darkness they were born in, and had no desire for daylight? We never yearn for what we have never known, and regret can only come after we have experienced pleasure, and a memory of past joys always accompanies a knowledge of evil. The nature of man is certainly to be free, but his nature is also such that he adopts the lifestyle that his upbringing gives him.

Let us say, then, that all those things that a man is brought up to do and which he becomes accustomed to, seem natural to him, but that what is proper to him is exclusively what his simple, unadulterated nature impels him to do. Thus, the first explanation for voluntary servitude is custom. The most spirited of horses will first bite the bit — and then they play with it; and at first they try to throw off the saddle — but then proudly disport in the harness and show off their apparel. Men say that they have always been subjects of a king, that their ancestors lived this way. They imagine that they are obliged to endure this evil, and they convince themselves of this by pointing to examples, and they argue that those who tyrannize them are entitled to because they have been doing this for so long. The truth is that the passage of time does not le-

family of his origin and because he and Sylla were close relatives, the door was never closed to him. He always had his teacher with him when he went there, as was the custom for children of noble birth. He noticed that in the house of Sylla, in the dictator's presence or at his command, some men were imprisoned and others sentenced; one was banished, another was strangled; one demanded the goods of another citizen, another his head; in short, all went there, not as to the house of a city magistrate but as to the people's tyrant, and this was therefore not a court of justice, but rather a resort of tyranny. Whereupon the young lad said to his teacher, "Why don't you give me a dagger? I will hide it under my robe. I often go into Sylla's room before he is risen, and my arm is strong enough to rid the city of him." There is a speech truly characteristic of Cato; it was a true beginning of this hero so worthy of his end. And should one not mention his name or his country, but state merely the fact as it is, the episode itself would speak eloquently, and anyone would divine that he was a Roman born in Rome at the time when she was free.

And why all this? Certainly not because I believe that the land or the region has anything to do with it, for in any place and in any climate subjection is bitter and to be free is pleasant; but merely because I am of the opinion that one should pity those who, at birth, arrive with the yoke upon their necks. We should exonerate and forgive them, since they have not seen even the shadow of liberty, and, being quite unaware of it, cannot perceive the evil endured through their own slavery. If there were actually a country like that of the Cimmerians mentioned by Homer, where the sun shines otherwise than on our own, shedding its radiance steadily for six successive months and then leaving humanity to drowse in obscurity until it returns at the end of another half-year, should we be surprised to learn that those born during this long night do grow so accustomed to their native darkness that unless they were told about the sun they would have no desire to see the light? One never pines for what he has never known; longing comes only af-

ter enjoyment and constitutes, amidst the experience of sorrow, the memory of past joy. It is truly the nature of man to be free and to wish to be so, yet his character is such that he instinctively follows the tendencies that his training gives him.

Let us therefore admit that all those things to which he is trained and accustomed seem natural to man and that only that is truly native to him which he receives with his primitive, untrained individuality. Thus custom becomes the first reason for voluntary servitude. Men are like handsome race horses who first bite the bit and later like it, and rearing under the saddle a while soon learn to enjoy displaying their harness and prance proudly beneath their trappings. Similarly men will grow accustomed to the idea that they have always been in subjection, that their fathers lived in the same way; they will think they are obliged to suffer this evil, and will persuade themselves by example and imitation of others, finally investing those who order them around with proprietary rights, based on the idea that it has always been that way.

There are always a few, better endowed than others, who feel the weight of the yoke and cannot restrain themselves from attempting to shake it off: these are the men who never become tamed under subjection and who always, like Ulysses on land and sea constantly seeking the smoke of his chimney, cannot prevent themselves from peering about for their natural privileges and from remembering their ancestors and their former ways. These are in fact the men who, possessed of clear minds and far-sighted spirit, are not satisfied, like the brutish mass, to see only what is at their feet, but rather look about them, behind and before, and even recall the things of the past in order to judge those of the future, and compare both with their present condition. These are the ones who, having good minds of their own, have further trained them by study and learning. Even if liberty had entirely perished from the earth, such men would invent it. For them slavery has no satisfactions, no matter how well disguised.

offers of friendship. 'You Spartans have only to look around you', he said, 'and you will realize from the way the king has treated me that he has his way of showing esteem for meritorious people. Just think: if you were allies of his, he would treat you this way as well. If he got to know you, you would each be the master of a city in Greece'. 'You are not in a position to advise us on this', said the Spartans. 'You have experienced the good fortune which you are promising us but you have no knowledge of the good fortune which we at present enjoy. You have known the king's favor, but you know nothing of the sweet taste of freedom. And if you had tasted it, you would be advising us to defend it not just with spear and shield but with tooth and nail'. The Spartan alone was talking sense, but there is no doubt that it was each man's upbringing that determined what he said. For it was impossible for the Persian to hanker after liberty, having never experienced it, or for the Spartan to endure subjugation when he had tasted freedom.

When Cato of Utica was still a child under instruction, he often used to visit the house of the dictator Sulla, partly because his family's prestige gave him free access and partly because the two families were related. As was the custom with children of noble households, he always had his tutor with him when he went to Sulla's house. He observed there that in Sulla's presence, or on the orders of Sulla, people were imprisoned and condemned to death. One man was banished, another strangled, one man demanded confiscation of a citizen's possessions, another demanded a citizen's head. In short, the conduct of affairs indicated that this was not the residence of a public official but that of an oppressor of the people, not a court of justice but a tyrant's workshop. And so this young lad said to his tutor, 'Why don't you give me a dagger? I can hide it beneath my cloak. I often go into Sulla's bedroom before he gets up, and I am strong enough to free the city of him'. That is truly an utterance worthy of Cato, a first glimpse of his character, and of a piece with the manner of his death. And yet if this event were related without mention of the name and nationality of Cato,

the fields to the sound of the hunting-horn and the bugle. To show the Spartans that men are what their upbringing makes them, he placed the two dogs in the public square and put between them a bowl of broth and a hare: one dog went for the bowl and the other went for the hare. 'And yet', he said, 'they are brothers'. Lycurgus, then, by his law making and government, educated and formed the Spartans so successfully that each one of them would rather have died a thousand deaths than acknowledge any other master than reason and law.

It is delightful to recall the conversation which once took place between a courtier of the great Persian king Xerxes and two Spartans. When Xerxes was equipping his great army to conquer Greece, he sent ambassadors to the Greek cities to demand earth and water: that was the formula by which the Persians used to call on cities to ally themselves with them. He sent no ambassadors to Athens or Sparta because when his father Darius had sent ambassadors to these two cities, they had thrown some of them into pits and the others into wells, telling them that those were the places where they could go and find earth and water to take back to their king. Those nations could not bear to hear the slightest word which might injure their liberty. But the Spartans knew that in treating the ambassadors that way, they had incurred the hatred of the gods, and especially of Talthibius, the god of heralds. To make their peace with the gods, they decided to send two of their own citizens to Xerxes; they were to present themselves to him with the message that he could treat them as he saw fit, and thus secure compensation for his father's ambassadors whom they had killed. Two Spartans, one called Spertus and the other Bulis, volunteered to go. And so they set off, and on the way they arrived at a place belonging to a Persian named Hydarnes, who was the king's lieutenant in the Asian coastal cities. Hydarnes gave them a most honorable reception, and welcomed them with great splendor, and after conversing casually on various topics he asked them why they so vehemently turned down the king's

The Grand Turk was well aware that books and teaching more than anything else give men the sense to comprehend their own nature and to detest tyranny. I understand that in his territory there are few educated people, for he does not want many. On account of this restriction, men of strong zeal and devotion, who in spite of the passing of time have preserved their love of freedom, still remain ineffective because, however numerous they may be, they are not known to one another; under the tyrant they have lost freedom of action, of speech, and almost of thought; they are alone in their aspiration. Indeed Momus, god of mockery, was not merely joking when he found this to criticize in the man fashioned by Vulcan, namely, that the maker had not set a little window in his creature's heart to render his thoughts visible. It is reported that Brutus, Cassius, and Casca, on undertaking to free Rome, and for that matter the whole world, refused to include in their band Cicero,<sup>20</sup> that great enthusiast for the public welfare if ever there was one, because they considered his heart too timid for such a lofty deed; they trusted his willingness but they were none too sure of his courage. Yet whoever studies the deeds of earlier days and the annals of antiquity will find practically no instance of heroes who failed to deliver their country from evil hands when they set about their task with a firm, whole-hearted, and sincere intention. Liberty, as if to reveal her nature, seems to have given them new strength. Harmodios and Aristogiton,<sup>21</sup> Thrasybulus,<sup>22</sup> Brutus the Elder,<sup>23</sup> Vale-

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<sup>20</sup> Cited from Plutarch's *Life of Cicero*.

<sup>21</sup> Tradition made of Harmodios and Aristogiton martyrs for Athenian liberty. They plotted the death of the tyrant Hippias but were betrayed and put to death by torture, c. 500 B.C.

<sup>22</sup> Athenian statesmen and general (died 388 B.C.) who ousted the Thirty Tyrants from power in Athens and restored the government to the people.

<sup>23</sup> Lucius Junius Brutus was the leader of the Roman revolution which overthrew the tyranny of Tarquinius Superbus, c. 500 B.C., and established the republic under the two praetors or consuls. As one of these magistrates it became his dolorous duty to condemn to death his two sons because they had plotted for the return of the Tarquins.

rianus,<sup>24</sup> and Dion<sup>25</sup> achieved successfully what they planned virtuously: for hardly ever does good fortune fail a strong will. Brutus the Younger and Cassius were successful in eliminating servitude, and although they perished in their attempt to restore liberty, they did not die miserably (what blasphemy it would be to say there was anything miserable about these men, either in their death or in their living!). Their loss worked great harm, everlasting misfortune, and complete destruction of the Republic, which appears to have been buried with them. Other and later undertakings against the Roman emperors were merely plottings of ambitious people, who deserve no pity for the misfortunes that overtook them, for it is evident that they sought not to destroy, but merely to usurp the crown, scheming to drive away the tyrant, but to retain tyranny. For myself, I could not wish such men to prosper and I am glad they have shown by their example that the sacred name of Liberty must never be used to cover a false enterprise.

But to come back to the thread of our discourse, which I have practically lost: the essential reason why men take orders willingly is that they are born serfs and are reared as such. From this cause there follows another result, namely that people easily become cowardly and submissive under tyrants. For this observation I am deeply grateful to Hippocrates, the renowned father of medicine, who noted and reported it in a treatise of his entitled *Concerning Diseases*. This famous man was certainly endowed with a great heart and proved it clearly by his reply to the Great King,<sup>26</sup> who wanted to attach him to his person by means of special privileges and large gifts. Hippocrates answered frankly that it would be a

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<sup>24</sup> Publius Licinius Valerianus was a brilliant military leader chosen by his troops to be Emperor during a time of great anarchy. He met his death in Persia (260 A.D.).

<sup>25</sup> Dion of Syracuse (400–354? B.C.) was famous for his protection of Plato in Sicily and for his expedition in 357, which freed his city from the tyranny of Denis.

<sup>26</sup> Artaxerxes.

powerful in teaching us to be slaves, and to swallow the venom of servitude without noticing any bitter taste, just as Mirthridates is said to have accustomed himself to drinking poison. One cannot deny that Nature has great influence over us, and inclines us the way she wills, which is why people are called ‘good natured’ or ‘bad natured’. But we have to confess that she has less power over us than custom does, for our natural state, however good it may be, is lost if it is not developed, whereas our upbringing always molds us into its own shape, whatever our natural disposition. The good seeds that nature sows in us are so tiny and so insecure that they cannot withstand the slightest pressure from a contrary upbringing. And developing them is not easy — whereas it is easy for them to become bastardized and melt away into nothing. In the same way, fruit trees have their own nature, and retain it if left on their own to grow, but they lose it and bear alien fruit when grafted. Plants all have their own natural properties, but their individual qualities can be greatly developed or diminished by frost, by the passing of time, by the soil they are in or by the hand of the gardener, so that a species you may have seen in one place can be hard to recognize elsewhere.

Anyone who saw the Venetians, a tiny nation living in such liberty that the worst rogue among them would not wish to be their king, born and bred with a single avowed ambition to excel their fellows in meticulous and vigilant care to uphold liberty, formed from the cradle to reject all other worldly goods rather than lose one iota of their freedom — anyone, I say, who saw those people and then went to the realm of the man we call the Great Lord, and saw how people there reckon that the sole purpose of their existence is to serve this man and to sacrifice their lives to keep him in power: would he reckon that these two nations shared a common nature, or would he not rather judge that he had left a city and entered a sheepfold? Lycurgus, the legislator of Sparta, is said to have kept two dogs which were brothers and reared on the same milk: but one was fattened in the kitchen, the other toughened in



this nation I am greatly irritated at this decision of theirs, almost to the point of taking an inhuman delight in all the ills that befell them because of it. But there is no doubt that so long as men retain something of the human about them, they will only be reduced to subservience either by constraint or deception. Constraint may come from foreign military force, as in the case of the subjection of Sparta or Athens to the armies of Alexander, or from factions, as was the case with Athens before it came into the hands of Pisistratus. Deception is a frequent cause of loss of liberty, and in this people are more often deceived by themselves than by other people. Thus, when the people of Syracuse (the main city of Sicily, which I gather is now called Saragossa) found themselves at war, they dealt only with the immediate danger and made Dionysius I the sole commander of the army — a reckless thing to do. They did not realize how powerful the army was making him; and when he returned victorious with this mighty force, he changed from being a general to being a king, and from a king to a tyrant, as though it were not the enemy he had defeated, but his fellow-citizens.

It is incredible how the people, once subjugated, forget their freedom so rapidly and so completely that they are quite unable to wake up and win it back. They are such willing slaves that you would say they had gained their servitude rather than lost their freedom. It is true that initially it takes force to reduce people to a state of servitude. But there is nothing reluctant about the servitude of future generations: they carry out willingly the tasks that their predecessors had done through compulsion. Men born beneath the yoke and educated in slavery will look no further; they are content to live in the condition in which they were born, with no other possessions or entitlements, and assume that this condition is the one which nature ordains. And yet you will find no heirs so reckless and apathetic as to fail to check his father's inventories so as to be sure he has duly inherited all that he is entitled to, and that no-one has defrauded him or his predecessor. But custom, which holds great sway over us in all respects, is supremely

weight on his conscience to make use of his science for the cure of barbarians who wished to slay his fellow Greeks, or to serve faithfully by his skill anyone who undertook to enslave Greece. The letter he sent the king can still be read among his other works and will forever testify to his great heart and noble character.

By this time it should be evident that liberty once lost, valor also perishes. A subject people shows neither gladness nor eagerness in combat: its men march sullenly to danger almost as if in bonds, and stultified; they do not feel throbbing within them that eagerness for liberty which engenders scorn of peril and imparts readiness to acquire honor and glory by a brave death amidst one's comrades. Among free men there is competition as to who will do most, each for the common good, each by himself, all expecting to share in the misfortunes of defeat, or in the benefits of victory; but an enslaved people loses in addition to this warlike courage, all signs of enthusiasm, for their hearts are degraded, submissive, and incapable of any great deed. Tyrants are well aware of this, and, in order to degrade their subjects further, encourage them to assume this attitude and make it instinctive.

Xenophon, grave historian of first rank among the Greeks, wrote a book<sup>27</sup> in which he makes Simonides speak with Hieron, Tyrant of Syracuse, concerning the anxieties of the tyrant. This book is full of fine and serious remonstrances, which in my opinion are as persuasive as words can be. Would to God that all despots who have ever lived might have kept it before their eyes and used it as a mirror! I cannot believe they would have failed to recognize their warts and to have conceived some shame for their blotches. In this treatise is explained the torment in which tyrants find them-

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<sup>27</sup> The *Hieron*, a youthful didactic work, consisting of a dialogue between Simonides and the Tyrant of Syracuse. The latter confesses his inner doubts and misgivings, his weariness at the dangers constantly besetting him, his sadness at not being loved by anyone. Even if he gave up his power, he would be in danger from the many enemies he has made. Simonides advises him to mend his ways and try kindness and generosity as a way of government.

selves when obliged to fear everyone because they do evil unto every man. Among other things we find the statement that bad kings employ foreigners in their wars and pay them, not daring to entrust weapons in the hands of their own people, whom they have wronged. (There have been good kings who have used mercenaries from foreign nations, even among the French, although more so formerly than today, but with the quite different purpose of preserving their own people, considering as nothing the loss of money in the effort to spare French lives. That is, I believe, what Scipio<sup>28</sup> the great African meant when he said he would rather save one citizen than defeat a hundred enemies.) For it is plainly evident that the dictator does not consider his power firmly established until he has reached the point where there is no man under him who is of any worth.

Therefore there may be justly applied to him the reproach to the master of the elephants made by Thrason and reported by Terence:

Are you indeed so proud  
Because you command wild beasts?<sup>29</sup>

This method tyrants use of stultifying their subjects cannot be more clearly observed than in what Cyrus<sup>30</sup> did with the Lydians after he had taken Sardis, their chief city, and had at his mercy the captured Croesus, their fabulously rich king. When news was brought to him that the people of Sardis had rebelled, it would have been easy for him to reduce them by force; but being unwilling either to sack such a fine city or to maintain an army there to police it, he thought of an unusual expedient for reducing it. He established

<sup>28</sup> Publius Cornelius Scipio (235–183 B.C.) led the brilliant campaign in Africa which caused Hannibal's recall from Italy and his final defeat.

<sup>29</sup> *The Eunuch*, Act III, Scene 1.

<sup>30</sup> Cyrus the Great (died 528 B.C.), founder of the Persian Empire, attacked Croesus before the latter could organize his army, and drove him in mid-winter out of his capital of Sardis. The episode here mentioned is related in *Herodotus*, Book I, chap. 86.

have become king by right of war conduct themselves in such a way that people are left in no doubt that they are living in what are called conquered lands. Those who are born kings are commonly little better; being born and brought up in the womb of tyranny, they imbibe a tyrant's nature with their mother's milk, and treat their underlings as their inherited serfs, and treat the kingdom as a personal inheritance to be administered with parsimony or prodigality, according to their own temperament. A man given power by the people ought, it seems to me, to be more bearable; and I imagine he would be, were it not that from the moment he sees himself elevated above the others, he feels flattered by something people call greatness, and resolves not to relinquish power, and usually arranges to hand on to his children that power which the people have given him. And as soon as these people get these ideas, it is a curious fact that they surpass the other tyrants in all sorts of vices, and especially in cruelty. For they see no other way of consolidating the new tyranny than by making servitude so prevalent and liberty so alien to people that they lose all memory of it, however recent that memory. So, truth to tell, I can see some difference between these sorts of tyrant, but can see nothing at all to choose between them. They come to power by different methods, but the way they govern is always virtually identical. Elected monarchs treat the people like bulls to be tamed, conquerors treat the people as their prey, inheritors treat the people as their natural slaves.

But now, supposing a new race of men were to be born today, neither accustomed to subjection nor enamored of liberty, having no knowledge of either, and scarcely even familiar with the words 'subjection' and 'liberty', and supposing they were offered the choice between being serfs and living in freedom according to laws they agreed on among themselves, there can be no doubt they would greatly prefer to obey reason alone rather than be the slaves of one man. The exception, perhaps, would be the people of Israel who, being under no pressure and having no need to do this, made themselves a monarch. Whenever I read the history of

animals, from the greatest to the smallest, violently resist capture with claws, horns, beaks, feet, declaring attachment to what they are losing, and when they are captured they give many clear signs of their unhappiness, so that we note — and with admiration for them — that henceforth they are languishing rather than living, and prolonging their life in order to deplore their lost comfort rather than because they are content with servitude. When an elephant has defended himself to the point of total exhaustion and sees that capture is inevitable, he buries his jaws into trees and smashes his teeth: what does that mean? It means his longing to retain his freedom has sharpened his wits, moving him to make a deal with the hunters so that they will let him go in exchange for his teeth, allowing him freedom for his ivory. We try to accustom a horse from birth to be subservient to us by offering it food, but despite all our blandishments it will bite the bit when we start trying to tame it, and resist the spur — as if to demonstrate to nature in that one way at least that its servitude is not a willing one, but one which we have imposed upon it. What then are we to conclude?

Oxen, even, at the yoke will groan,  
And birds in cage confined will always moan

— as I once said in verse. (For, Longa, I have no hesitation in inserting my verses in a book dedicated to you: whenever I read them to you, you seem well content and make me feel quite conceited!). Since, then, all beings which are endowed with feeling automatically feel that subjection is evil, and hanker after liberty, and since beasts, albeit made for the service of man, cannot accustom themselves to servitude without protesting a contrary desire, what manner of disaster has so distorted the nature of man, the only being truly born to be free, and caused him to lose the memory of his original state and desire to regain it?

There are three types of tyrant. Some are king by democratic election, others by force of arms, others by inheritance. Those who

in it brothels, taverns, and public games, and issued the proclamation that the inhabitants were to enjoy them. He found this type of garrison so effective that he never again had to draw the sword against the Lydians. These wretched people enjoyed themselves inventing all kinds of games, so that the Latins have derived the word from them, and what we call *pastimes* they call *ludi*, as if they meant to say *Lydi*. Not all tyrants have manifested so clearly their intention to effeminize their victims; but in fact, what the aforementioned despot publicly proclaimed and put into effect, most of the others have pursued secretly as an end. It is indeed the nature of the populace, whose density is always greater in the cities, to be suspicious toward one who has their welfare at heart, and gullible toward one who fools them. Do not imagine that there is any bird more easily caught by decoy, nor any fish sooner fixed on the hook by wormy bait, than are all these poor fools neatly tricked into servitude by the slightest feather passed, so to speak, before their mouths. Truly it is a marvellous thing that they let themselves be caught so quickly at the slightest tickling of their fancy. Plays, farces, spectacles, gladiators, strange beasts, medals, pictures, and other such opiates, these were for ancient peoples the bait toward slavery, the price of their liberty, the instruments of tyranny. By these practices and enticements the ancient dictators so successfully lulled their subjects under the yoke, that the stupefied peoples, fascinated by the pastimes and vain pleasures flashed before their eyes, learned subservience as naively, but not so creditably, as little children learn to read by looking at bright picture books. Roman tyrants invented a further refinement. They often provided the city wards with feasts to cajole the rabble, always more readily tempted by the pleasure of eating than by anything else. The most intelligent and understanding amongst them would not have quit his soup bowl to recover the liberty of the Republic of Plato. Tyrants would distribute largess, a bushel of wheat, a gallon of wine, and a

sesterce:<sup>31</sup> and then everybody would shamelessly cry, “Long live the King!” The fools did not realize that they were merely recovering a portion of their own property, and that their ruler could not have given them what they were receiving without having first taken it from them. A man might one day be presented with a sesterce and gorge himself at the public feast, lauding Tiberius and Nero for handsome liberality, who on the morrow, would be forced to abandon his property to their avarice, his children to their lust, his very blood to the cruelty of these magnificent emperors, without offering any more resistance than a stone or a tree stump. The mob has always behaved in this way — eagerly open to bribes that cannot be honorably accepted, and dissolutely callous to degradation and insult that cannot be honorably endured. Nowadays I do not meet anyone who, on hearing mention of Nero, does not shudder at the very name of that hideous monster, that disgusting and vile pestilence. Yet when he died — when this incendiary, this executioner, this savage beast, died as vilely as he had lived — the noble Roman people, mindful of his games and his festivals, were saddened to the point of wearing mourning for him. Thus wrote Cornelius Tacitus,<sup>32</sup> a competent and serious author, and one of the most reliable. This will not be considered peculiar in view of what this same people had previously done at the death of Julius Caesar, who had swept away their laws and their liberty, in whose character, it seems to me, there was nothing worth while, for his very liberality, which is so highly praised, was more baneful than the crudest tyrant who ever existed, because it was actually this poisonous amiability of his that sweetened servitude for the Roman people. After his death, that people, still preserving on their palates the flavor of his banquets and in their minds the memory of his prodigality, vied with one another to pay him homage. They

<sup>31</sup> A Roman coin (semis-half, tertius-third) of variable value, originally of silver, later of bronze.

<sup>32</sup> In his *Histories* (Book I, chap. 4) which cover the period (69–96 A.D.) from the fall of Nero to the crowning of Nerva.

with some people being in a position to offer assistance and others needing it.

Since, then, our good mother nature has given all of us the whole world as our dwelling, and has, so to speak, lodged us all in the same house, and has designed us on the same pattern so that each of us could see himself reflected in others and recognize himself in others, and has given us all the great gift of speech so that we could come to a still deeper acquaintance and brotherhood, and acquire a common will by sharing our thoughts one with another, and has striven by every possible means to bind us together in the tight embrace of kinship and companionship, and has shown in everything she does that her intention was not was not so much to make us united as to make us one — we cannot doubt that we are by nature free, since we are companions of each other. And nobody can imagine that nature has placed anyone in a position of servitude, since she has made each of us the companion of all others. But it is really idle to debate whether liberty is ordained by nature, since it is impossible to keep anyone in a state of servitude without doing him wrong, and nature, being entirely reasonable, abhors nothing more than a wrong. The only remaining conclusion is that liberty is ordained by nature, and by the same token we will conclude (in my view) that we are born not simply in possession of our freedom, but with a desire to defend it.

Now if we have any doubt about that, and have fallen so far beneath the human that we are insensitive to those possessions and desires which nature placed in man, then I shall have to treat you with the respect you deserve and, so to speak, place the very beasts in the professional chair so as to teach you your nature and condition. The beasts — God help me! — will cry out to men provided they do not turn an entirely deaf ear), ‘Long live freedom!’ As a fish takes leave of life itself the moment it leaves the water, there are many beast which die as soon as they are captured, refusing to survive the loss of their natural freedom. If there were any social ranking among animals, those would be the aristocrats. Other

like a great colossus whose plinth has been taken from under him, he will crumble and be shattered under his own weight.

But doctors tell us we ought not to meddle with wounds that are incurable. I am wasting my time preaching this lesson, for the people long ago lost consciousness, lost all awareness that they are sick. This fact demonstrates plainly that the condition is fatal. Let us therefore attempt to explain how this stubborn desire to be slaves has become so deeply-rooted that it now seems as though the very love of liberty is no longer natural.

In the first place, it is I think beyond doubt that if we were to live according to the rights which nature gave us and the precepts she teaches us, we would be naturally obedient to our parents, we would be the subjects of reason and we would be the serfs of nobody. Concerning obedience to parents, we can all testify that nature instructs us in that. Concerning reason, and the question of whether we are born with reason or acquire it, a question debated in depth by the academics and touched on by all schools of philosophy, I do not think I shall be going far wrong if I say that our soul possesses by nature a seed of reason which, when sustained by good counsel and good habits, reaches the full power of virtue, and which on the other hand, in the presence of vices, is often unable to survive, and is stifled and crushed. But we have to admit that if there is anything clear and self-evident in nature, anything which we cannot pretend to be blind to, it is that nature, the minister of God and the governor of men, has made all of us in the same form, in the same mold as it were, so that we should recognize each other as fellow-beings — or rather, as brothers. In sharing out her gifts, she may have given some people physical or intellectual advantages over others, but it was certainly not her intention to place us in a kind of battleground, with the stronger or more intelligent terrorizing the weak, like armed brigands in a forest. Rather must we believe that in giving greater shares to some and less to others, she wanted to leave scope for the exercise of brotherly love,

piled up the seats of the Forum for the great fire that reduced his body to ashes, and later raised a column to him as to “The Father of His People.”<sup>33</sup> (Such was the inscription on the capital.) They did him more honor, dead as he was, than they had any right to confer upon any man in the world, except perhaps on those who had killed him.

They didn’t even neglect, these Roman emperors, to assume generally the title of Tribune of the People, partly because this office was held sacred and inviolable and also because it had been founded for the defense and protection of the people and enjoyed the favor of the state. By this means they made sure that the populace would trust them completely, as if they merely used the title and did not abuse it. Today there are some who do not behave very differently: they never undertake an unjust policy, even one of some importance, without prefacing it with some pretty speech concerning public welfare and common good. You well know, O Longa, this formula which they use quite cleverly in certain places; although for the most part, to be sure, there cannot be cleverness where there is so much impudence. The kings of the Assyrians and even after them those of the Medes showed themselves in public as seldom as possible in order to set up a doubt in the minds of the rabble as to whether they were not in some way more than man, and thereby to encourage people to use their imagination for those things which they cannot judge by sight. Thus a great many nations who for a long time dwelt under the control of the Assyrians became accustomed, with all this mystery, to their own subjection, and submitted the more readily for not knowing what sort of master they had, or scarcely even if they had one, all of them fearing by report someone they had never seen. The earliest kings of Egypt rarely showed themselves without carrying a cat, or sometimes a branch, or appearing with fire on their heads, masking themselves with these objects and parading like workers of magic.

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<sup>33</sup> Suetonius, *Life of Caesar*, paragraphs 84–88.

By doing this they inspired their subjects with reverence and admiration, whereas with people neither too stupid nor too slavish they would merely have aroused, it seems to me, amusement and laughter. It is pitiful to review the list of devices that early despots used to establish their tyranny; to discover how many little tricks they employed, always finding the populace conveniently gullible, readily caught in the net as soon as it was spread. Indeed they always fooled their victims so easily that while mocking them they enslaved them the more.

What comment can I make concerning another fine counterfeit that ancient peoples accepted as true money? They believed firmly that the great toe of Pyrrhus,<sup>34</sup> king of Epirus, performed miracles and cured diseases of the spleen; they even enhanced the tale further with the legend that this toe, after the corpse had been burned, was found among the ashes, untouched by the fire. In this wise a foolish people itself invents lies and then believes them. Many men have recounted such things, but in such a way that it is easy to see that the parts were pieced together from idle gossip of the city and silly reports from the rabble. When Vespasian,<sup>35</sup> returning from Assyria, passes through Alexandria on his way to Rome to take possession of the empire, he performs wonders: he makes the crippled straight, restores sight to the blind, and does many other fine things, concerning which the credulous and indiscriminating were, in my opinion, more blind than those cured. Tyrants themselves have wondered that men could endure the persecution of a single man; they have insisted on using religion for their own pro-

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<sup>34</sup> The great dreamer of empire whose costly victory at Asculum wrecked his hopes of world domination. He was finally killed (272 B.C.) by a tile dropped on his head by an old woman. This story of the toe conies from Plutarch's *Life of Pyrrhus*.

<sup>35</sup> Titus Flavius Vespasianus left his son Titus to complete the capture of Jerusalem while he, newly elected Emperor by his armies, turned back to Rome after the death of Galba in 69 A.D. The reference here is found in Suetonius, *Life of Vespasian*, Chapter VII.

be pillaged, your houses despoiled and stripped of your ancient ancestral possessions! You can claim nothing as your own, and it seems you would be glad to be allowed to rent from someone else your possessions, your families and your very lives. And all this devastation, this misfortune, this ruin is not visited upon you by an enemy — or rather, it does come from an enemy, and from the man to whom you give the power he has, for whom you so courageously go to war, laying down your lives without hesitation to make him more powerful. Your oppressor has but two eyes, two hands, one body, and has nothing that the least of your infinite number of citizens does not have — except the advantage you give him, which is the power to destroy you. Where did he get those eyes which spy on you, if you did not give him them? Would he have all those hands to strike you with, if he did not get them from you? Those feet which trample upon your cities, where did he get them if they are not your own. What power has he over you, if it is not the power you give him. How would he ever dare attack you, if you were not his accomplices? What could he do to you, if you were not receivers of the goods this thief plunders from you, the companion of this murderer who is killing you, traitors to yourselves? You sow your fruit so that he can destroy the harvest. You furnish your houses, so that he can pillage them. You bring up your daughters to sate his lust. You bring up your children so that (at best) he will take them off to fight his wars and be butchered, or make them ministers to his greed and instruments of his vengeance. You accustom yourselves to hardship so that he can enjoy a life of luxury and wallow in foul and base pleasures. You make yourselves weak so that he can be strong and oppress you ever more harshly. The very beasts would not endure these humiliations if they were capable of feeling them. But you can deliver yourselves if you make the effort — not an effort to deliver yourselves, but an effort to want to do so. Resolve to be slaves no more, and you are free! I am not asking you to push him out of your way, to topple him: just stop propping him up and,

A little spark can start a flame which will devour all the wood it finds, growing stronger all the time. But you do not need water over it to extinguish it — if you stop supplying wood it will consume itself, since it has nothing else to consume, and will languish and die out. In the same way, the more that tyrants pillage, the more they exact and extort, the more they ruin and destroy, the more you give them, the more you subject yourself to them — so much the stronger they become, so much the readier to destroy everything, to wipe out everything. But if you give them nothing, if you withhold your obedience, then — without you having to struggle or strike a blow — they become naked, defeated, mere nonentities, nothing but the dry, dead branch of a tree whose roots have been deprived of moisture and sustenance.

Bold men have no fear of danger when it comes to getting what they want, and intelligent people do not begrudge effort. People who are cowardly and lazy are not able to endure hardship and not able to get what they want. All they can do is wish they could, for their cowardice denies them the courage needed to go out and get it. Their desire remains, as is natural. And the desire, the will, is common to the wise and the foolish, the courageous and the cowardly: they all long for what would make them happy and contented if they got it. There is just one desire which nature — I know not why — has failed to endow us with, and that is the desire for liberty. And yet liberty is such a great and pleasurable possession that if we lose it, all evils come upon us one after the other, and even those good things which we still have lose all their flavor and taste, as they are corrupted by servitude. Liberty is the one thing which men have no desire for, and it seems as though the only reason this is so is that if they desired it, they would have it. It is as though they are refusing this wonderful acquisition simply on the grounds that it costs so little effort.

Pitiful, abject nations, you have taken leave of your senses! You cling stubbornly to evil and are blind to what is good. You allow the best part of your income to be taken from you, you let your farms

tection and, where possible, have borrowed a stray bit of divinity to bolster up their evil ways. If we are to believe the Sybil of Virgil, Salmoneus,<sup>36</sup> in torment for having paraded as Jupiter in order to deceive the populace, now atones in nethermost Hell:

He suffered endless torment for having dared to imitate  
The thunderbolts of heaven and the flames of Jupiter.  
Upon a chariot drawn by four chargers he went,  
unsteadily  
Riding aloft, in his fist a great shining torch.  
Among the Greeks and into the market-place  
In the heart of the city of Elis he had ridden boldly:  
And displaying thus his vainglory he assumed  
An honor which undeniably belongs to the gods  
alone.  
This fool who imitated storm and the inimitable  
thunderbolt  
By clash of brass and with his dizzying charge  
On horn-hoofed steeds, the all-powerful Father  
beheld,  
Hurled not a torch, nor the feeble light  
From a waxen taper with its smoky fumes,  
But by the furious blast of thunder and lightning  
He brought him low, his heels above his head.<sup>37</sup>

If such a one, who in his time acted merely through the folly of insolence, is so well received in Hell, I think that those who have used religion as a cloak to hide their vile-ness will be even more deservedly lodged in the same place.

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<sup>36</sup> In Greek mythology, Salmoneus, King of Elis, was the son of Aeolus and the brother of Sisyphus. He was reckless and sacrilegious and claimed to be the equal of Zeus by imitating his thunderbolts. Zeus threw him into Hades.

<sup>37</sup> *Aeneid*, Chapter VI, verses 585 *et seq.*

Our own leaders have employed in France certain similar devices, such as toads, fleurs-de-lys, sacred vessels, and standards with flames of gold.<sup>38</sup> However that may be, I do not wish, for my part, to be incredulous, since neither we nor our ancestors have had any occasion up to now for skepticism. Our kings have always been so generous in times of peace and so valiant in time of war, that from birth they seem not to have been created by nature like many others, but even before birth to have been designated by Almighty God for the government and preservation of this kingdom. Even if this were not so, yet should I not enter the tilting ground to call in question the truth of our traditions, or to examine them so strictly as to take away their fine conceits. Here is such a field for our French poetry, now not merely honored but, it seems to me, reborn through our Ronsard, our Baïf, our Bellay.<sup>39</sup> These poets are defending our language so well that I dare to believe that very soon neither the Greeks nor the Latins will in this respect have any advantage over us except possibly that of seniority. And I should assuredly do wrong to our poesy — I like to use that word despite the fact that several have rimed mechanically, for I still discern a number of men today capable of ennobling poetry and restoring it to its first lustre — but, as I say, I should do the Muse great injury if

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<sup>38</sup> These are references to heraldic emblems of royalty. The sacred vessel contained the holy oil for the coronation of the kings of France, said to have been brought by an angel from heaven for the crowning of Clovis in 496. The fleur-de-lis is the well-known heraldic flower dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In its earlier forms it has other elements besides petals, such as arrow tips, spikes, and even bees and toads. The oriflamme or standard of gold was also adopted by French royalty. Originally it belonged to the Abbey of St. Denis and had a red background, dotted with stars surrounding a flaming sun. Some scholars have noted in the three branches of the fleur-de-lis a heraldic transformation of toads which formed presumably the totem of the ancient Franks.

<sup>39</sup> These three were the most inspired of the Pléiade, a group of seven poets of the Renaissance in France. La Boétie's boast is impulsive but natural when one thinks of the vigor and hope of this period. Du Bellay (1548) published a *Defense of the French Language* which explained the literary doctrines of the group. The reference in the text to this *Defense* helps date the *Contr'un*.

It is curious to hear tell of the valor that freedom in the heart of its defenders. But who would ever believe that one man could oppress a hundred thousand and deprive them of their liberty (and this happens in all lands, in all communities, every day!), if all he had to go on was someone else's report, and if he did not have the evidence of his own eyes? If it only happened in foreign, far-away lands, and somebody told us it was happening, surely anybody would reckon that the story was utterly fictitious?

Now there is no need to combat this solitary tyrant, no need to defeat him: he will be automatically defeated, provided only that the nation refuses to accept slavery. There is no need to take anything from him: simply refuse to give him anything. There is no need for the nation to do anything on its own behalf, so long as it refrains from doing anything against itself. It is evident, then, that people allow themselves to be dominated, or rather that they actually bring about their own domination, since merely by ceasing to serve they would be free. It is the people who enslave themselves, who cut their own throats, who, faced with a choice between servitude and freedom, abandon their liberty and accept the yoke, who consent to being harmed — or rather, seek to be harmed. If it costs the people something to recover their freedom, I would not press the point (is there anything, though, that man ought to hold more dear than to recover what nature entitles him to, and to become, as it were, a man rather than a beast?). But I am not calling upon men to display such bravery; I am accepting that they may prefer some sort of wretchedly secure existence to the dubious expectation of a life of full contentment. The point is this: if, to possess freedom, all you need to do is desire it, if all that is required is a simple act of the will, a mere wish, is there a single nation which will begrudge this simple desire, which will retrieve a possession worth winning at the cost of one's blood? Any man of honor will feel the loss of such a possession so keenly as to reckon life itself as tiresome and death as salutary.



just as valor cannot go so far as to lead one man to scale a fortress, to attack an army, to conquer a kingdom. So what prodigious vice is this for which the term 'cowardice' is too flattering, for which there is no name vile enough, which nature herself will not admit to having created and which the tongue can find no name for?

Suppose we have two armies of fifty thousand men confronting each other, with one army made up of free men fighting to stay free and the other fighting to take their freedom away from them: when they join battle, which side do you expect to emerge victorious? Who will go into battle with the greater vigor? Will it be those whose reward for their efforts will be the retention of their freedom, or will it be those whose only reward for the blows they give or receive will be to impose slavery on other people? One army has its past good fortune to reflect on, and the expectation that this good fortune will continue in the future: their thoughts will be not so much on what little they have to endure while the battle lasts as on what they and their children and their descendants might have to endure forever. Their foes have nothing but greed to spur them on. However sharp this greed, it is immediately blunted by danger; however violently it burns, it is extinguished by the first drop of their own blood. Consider those most illustrious battles fought two thousand years ago in Greece and Miltiades, Leonidas and Themistocles, battles which are fresh in our minds, and in the minds of writers, as though they had happened but yesterday. These battles were fought as examples for the whole of humanity as well as for the benefit of the Greeks. And what do you think it was that gave the Greeks, so few in number, that courage which transcended their lack of power, and enabled them to withstand a fleet so vast that the very sea was overloaded, and to defeat nations so numerous that the battalion of Greeks would not have been numerous enough to supply generals for the armies of the enemy? Was it not that in those glorious days it was no so much the Greeks fighting the Persians as a victory of liberty over domination, of freedom over greed?

I deprived her now of those fine tales about King Clovis, amongst which it seems to me I can already see how agreeably and how happily the inspiration of our Ronsard in his *Franciade*<sup>40</sup> will play. I appreciate his loftiness, I am aware of his keen spirit, and I know the charm of the man: he will appropriate the oriflamme to his use much as did the Romans their sacred bucklers and the shields cast from heaven to earth, according to Virgil.<sup>41</sup> He will use our phial of holy oil much as the Athenians used the basket of Erichthonius;<sup>42</sup> he will win applause for our deeds of valor as they did for their olive wreath which they insist can still be found in Minerva's tower. Certainly I should be presumptuous if I tried to cast slurs on our records and thus invade the realm of our poets.

But to return to our subject, the thread of which I have unwittingly lost in this discussion: it has always happened that tyrants, in order to strengthen their power, have made every effort to train their people not only in obedience and servility toward themselves, but also in adoration. Therefore all that I have said up to the present concerning the means by which a more willing submission has been obtained applies to dictators in their relationship with the inferior and common classes.

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<sup>40</sup> This unfinished epic has only four cantos; it attempts to relate how to Francus, son of Hector, is revealed the glorious future of France. He beholds a visionary procession of her kings descending from him all the way to Charlemagne. King Clovis (465–511), of whom many tales are told, was baptized after the miracle of Tolbiac and founded the Merovingian dynasty. Although the poem was not published till a few days after the Massacre of St. Bartholomew, Ronsard had spoken of his project more than twenty years before. He had even read the finished Prologue to Henry II in 1550. La Boétie's early reference bespeaks his close relations with the poets of his day.

<sup>41</sup> *Aeneid*, Canto viii, verse 664.

<sup>42</sup> Erichthonius, legendary King of Athens (1573–1556 B.C.) was the son of the earth. He is at times represented in the guise of a serpent carried by the Cecropides maidens to whom Athens had entrusted him as a child. The allusion here is to the Panathenaea festival when maidens carried garlanded baskets on their heads. Races were also held for which the winners received olive wreaths as prizes.

I come now to a point which is, in my opinion, the mainspring and the secret of domination, the support and foundation of tyranny. Whoever thinks that halberds, sentries, the placing of the watch, serve to protect and shield tyrants is, in my judgment, completely mistaken. These are used, it seems to me, more for ceremony and a show of force than for any reliance placed in them. The archers forbid the entrance to the palace to the poorly dressed who have no weapons, not to the well armed who can carry out some plot. Certainly it is easy to say of the Roman emperors that fewer escaped from danger by the aid of their guards than were killed by their own archers. It is not the troops on horseback, it is not the companies afoot, it is not arms that defend the tyrant. This does not seem credible on first thought, but it is nevertheless true that there are only four or five who maintain the dictator, four or five who keep the country in bondage to him. Five or six have always had access to his ear, and have either gone to him of their own accord, or else have been summoned by him, to be accomplices in his cruelties, companions in his pleasures, panders to his lusts, and sharers in his plunders. These six manage their chief so successfully that he comes to be held accountable not only for his own misdeeds but even for theirs. The six have six hundred who profit under them, and with the six hundred they do what they have accomplished with their tyrant. The six hundred maintain under them six thousand, whom they promote in rank, upon whom they confer the government of provinces or the direction of finances, in order that they may serve as instruments of avarice and cruelty, executing orders at the proper time and working such havoc all around that they could not last except under the shadow of the six hundred, nor be exempt from law and punishment except through their influence.

The consequence of all this is fatal indeed. And whoever is pleased to unwind the skein will observe that not the six thousand but a hundred thousand, and even millions, cling to the tyrant by this cord to which they are tied. According to Homer, Jupiter

in which he was doing good and putting him in a position in which he can do harm. But there is no doubt that there is something commendable about the fact that they fear no harm from someone who has done them nothing but good.

But — oh good God! — what is this? What words can describe this vice, this misfortune (or rather, vice and misfortune!) Whereby the obedience of an infinite number of people degenerates into servitude, government turns to tyranny, and people have nothing they can call their own, not even their parents, their wives, their children, their own lives! And they become prey to the pillage, lusts and cruelty not of some army, not of a barbarian horde which they could only resist by shedding their blood and laying down their lives, but of a single man! And is he a Hercules or a Samson? No, he is a solitary weakling, and usually the most cowardly and effeminate in the land, who is unaccustomed to the dust of battle and has hardly even set eyes on the sand of the jousting arena, and who has no authority to issue orders to men since he is an abject slave of some pitiful little woman! Are we to say that the people are cowards? Shall we call them pusillanimous and faint-hearted? Supposing you have two people, or three or four, who fail to defend themselves against one man: that is a strange situation, but still within the bounds of possibility, and we can rightly say that these people are lacking in courage. But if a hundred or a thousand people are willing to tolerate one man, surely we have to conclude not that they dare not defy him, but that they do not want to, and that their attitude is not one of cowardice but rather of apathy and disdain? If what we see is not a hundred or a thousand men, but a hundred nations and a thousand cities and a million men failing to challenge one man (who, however well he treats any individual, is still treating him as a serf and a slave), what are we to call that? Is it cowardice? Now all vices have natural limits: two people may fear one man, ten people may fear him. But if a thousand men, a million men, a thousand cities do not defend themselves against one man, that cannot be cowardice, for cowardice cannot go that far,

My sole aim on this occasion is to discover how it can happen that a vast number of individuals, of towns, cities and nations can allow one man to tyrannize them, a man who has no power except what they themselves give him, who could do them no harm were they not willing to suffer harm, and who could never wrong them were they not more ready to endure it than to stand in his way. It is a grievous matter — and yet so commonplace that our sorrow is the greater and our surprise the less — to see a million men in abject servitude, their necks bound to the yoke, and in that state not because they have had to yield to some greater force but, it seems, because they have been mesmerized by the mere name of a single man, a man they ought neither to fear (for he is just one man) nor love (as he is inhuman and barbaric towards them).

We often find ourselves in a position of weakness, with no option but to yield to force. We do not always have the upper hand, and we may have to play for time. We must not be surprised, then, when a nation which is at war finds itself compelled to serve one ruler (as the city of Athens served the thirty tyrants) — though we must deplore that servitude. Or rather, we must neither be surprised at the situation nor deplore it, but endure the misfortune patiently, and look forward to better fortune in the future.

Human nature is such that the way we live is largely influenced by the common duties of friendship. It is reasonable that we should love virtue, that we should have a high regard for noble deeds, that when someone does us a favor we should acknowledge the fact, and that we should be prepared to accept some reduction in our own comfort in order to enhance the standing of one whom we love and who had deserved our love. And in the same way, citizens of a whole nation will acknowledge that a particular individual has protected them by displaying great foresight, or had defended them with great bravery, or governed them with great care, and they may thus accept that it is reasonable to be obedient towards him, and they may go so far as to entrust him with power over them. I am not sure that this is wise, for they are removing him from a position

boasts of being able to draw to himself all the gods when he pulls a chain. Such a scheme caused the increase in the senate under Julius,<sup>43</sup> the formation of new ranks, the creation of offices; not really, if properly considered, to reform justice, but to provide new supporters of despotism. In short, when the point is reached, through big favors or little ones, that large profits or small are obtained under a tyrant, there are found almost as many people to whom tyranny seems advantageous as those to whom liberty would seem desirable. Doctors declare that if, when some part of the body has gangrene a disturbance arises in another spot, it immediately flows to the troubled part. Even so, whenever a ruler makes himself a dictator, all the wicked dregs of the nation — I do not mean the pack of petty thieves and earless ruffians<sup>44</sup> who, in a republic, are unimportant in evil or good — but all those who are corrupted by burning ambition or extraordinary avarice, these gather round him and support him in order to have a share in the booty and to constitute themselves petty chiefs under the big tyrant. This is the practice among notorious robbers and famous pirates: some scour the country, others pursue voyagers; some lie in ambush, others keep a lookout; some commit murder, others robbery; and although there are among them differences in rank, some being only underlings while others are chieftains of gangs, yet is there not a single one among them who does not feel himself to be a sharer, if not of the main booty, at least in the pursuit of it. It is dependably related that Sicilian pirates gathered in such great numbers that it became necessary to send against them Pompey the Great,<sup>45</sup> and that they drew into their alliance fine towns and great cities in whose harbors they took refuge on returning from

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<sup>43</sup> Under Caesar the power of the Senators was greatly reduced and military leaders were permitted to share with them legislative and judicial powers.

<sup>44</sup> The cutting off of ears as a punishment for thievery is very ancient. In the middle ages it was still practiced under St. Louis. Men so mutilated were dishonored and could not enter the clergy or the magistracy.

<sup>45</sup> Plutarch's *Life of Pompey*.

their expeditions, paying handsomely for the haven given their stolen goods.

Thus the despot subdues his subjects, some of them by means of others, and thus is he protected by those from whom, if they were decent men, he would have to guard himself; just as, in order to split wood, one has to use a wedge of the wood itself. Such are his archers, his guards, his halberdiers; not that they themselves do not suffer occasionally at his hands, but this riff-raff, abandoned alike by God and man, can be led to endure evil if permitted to commit it, not against him who exploits them, but against those who like themselves submit, but are helpless. Nevertheless, observing those men who painfully serve the tyrant in order to win some profit from his tyranny and from the subjection of the populace, I am often overcome with amazement at their wickedness and sometimes by pity for their folly. For, in all honesty, can it be in any way except in folly that you approach a tyrant, withdrawing further from your liberty and, so to speak, embracing with both hands your servitude? Let such men lay aside briefly their ambition, or let them forget for a moment their avarice, and look at themselves as they really are. Then they will realize clearly that the townspeople, the peasants whom they trample under foot and treat worse than convicts or slaves, they will realize, I say, that these people, mistreated as they may be, are nevertheless, in comparison with themselves, better off and fairly free. The tiller of the soil and the artisan, no matter how enslaved, discharge their obligation when they do what they are told to do; but the dictator sees men about him wooing and begging his favor, and doing much more than he tells them to do. Such men must not only obey orders; they must anticipate his wishes; to satisfy him they must foresee his desires; they must wear themselves out, torment themselves, kill themselves with work in his interest, and accept his pleasure as their own, neglecting their preferences for his, distorting their character and corrupting their nature; they must pay heed to his words, to his intonation, to his gestures, and to his glance. Let them have no eye, nor foot, nor

## Slaves by Choice

Having several lords is no good thing;  
Let one, and one alone, be lord and king!

So spoke Ulysses, in a speech recorded by Homer. If Ulysses had simply said 'Having several lords is no good thing', then he could have said nothing better. He ought to have gone on to show why domination by several people cannot be a good thing: the reason is that if you call anyone 'master', even if it is only one man, he will become harsh and unreasonable simply because he has been given that title. But instead of doing that, he went and added just the opposite, 'Let one, and one alone, be lord and king!'

Ulysses does perhaps have an excuse. He made this utterance at a time when a mutiny in the military had to be quelled, and it seems to me that this circumstance had more influence upon him than the objective truth did. The plain fact is that to be the subject of a master who always has the power to be wicked, and who can therefore never be relied on to be good, is an extreme misfortune — and the extremity of the misfortune is multiplied by the number of masters one has. But my topic is not that constantly debated question of whether the other types of political systems are better than monarchy. (Actually, it is debatable whether monarchy ought to be ranked among political systems at all, for it is hard to believe there is any such thing as politics when everything is in the hands of one man). I leave that question for another time. It requires a separate treatise — or rather, it brings with it every political discussion there is.

## Alternate English translation

hand that is not alert to respond to his wishes or to seek out his thoughts.

Can that be called a happy life? Can it be called living? Is there anything more intolerable than that situation, I won't say for a man of mettle nor even for a man of high birth, but simply for a man of common sense or, to go even further, for anyone having the face of a man? What condition is more wretched than to live thus, with nothing to call one's own, receiving from someone else one's sustenance, one's power to act, one's body, one's very life?

Still men accept servility in order to acquire wealth; as if they could acquire anything of their own when they cannot even assert that they belong to themselves, or as if anyone could possess under a tyrant a single thing in his own name. Yet they act as if their wealth really belonged to them, and forget that it is they themselves who give the ruler the power to deprive everybody of everything, leaving nothing that anyone can identify as belonging to somebody. They notice that nothing makes men so subservient to a tyrant's cruelty as property; that the possession of wealth is the worst of crimes against him, punishable even by death; that he loves nothing quite so much as money and ruins only the rich, who come before him as before a butcher, offering themselves so stuffed and bulging that they make his mouth water. These favorites should not recall so much the memory of those who have won great wealth from tyrants as of those who, after they had for some time amassed it, have lost to him their property as well as their lives; they should consider not how many others have gained a fortune, but rather how few of them have kept it. Whether we examine ancient history or simply the times in which we live, we shall see clearly how great is the number of those who, having by shameful means won the ear of princes — who either profit from their villainies or take advantage of their naïveté — were in the end reduced to nothing by these very princes; and although at first such servitors were met by a ready willingness to promote their interests, they later found an equally obvious inconstancy which

brought them to ruin. Certainly among so large a number of people who have at one time or another had some relationship with bad rulers, there have been few or practically none at all who have not felt applied to themselves the tyrant's animosity, which they had formerly stirred up against others. Most often, after becoming rich by despoiling others, under the favor of his protection, they find themselves at last enriching him with their own spoils.

Even men of character — if it sometimes happens that a tyrant likes such a man well enough to hold him in his good graces, because in him shine forth the virtue and integrity that inspire a certain reverence even in the most depraved — even men of character, I say, could not long avoid succumbing to the common malady and would early experience the effects of tyranny at their own expense. A Seneca, a Burrus, a Thrasea, this triumvirate<sup>46</sup> of splendid men, will provide a sufficient reminder of such misfortune. Two of them were close to the tyrant by the fatal responsibility of holding in their hands the management of his affairs, and both were esteemed and beloved by him. One of them, moreover, had a peculiar claim upon his friendship, having instructed his master as a child. Yet these three by their cruel death give sufficient evidence of how little faith one can place in the friendship of an evil ruler. Indeed what friendship may be expected from one whose heart is bitter enough to hate even his own people, who do naught else but obey

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<sup>46</sup> Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 B.C.-65 A.D.) was exiled from Rome to Corsica for eight years by the intrigues of Messalina, wife of Claudius. Agrippina had him recalled and entrusted to him jointly with Burrus the education of her son Nero. Seneca ended his life some fifteen years later when Nero, suspecting him of conspiracy, ordered him to die. Burrus similarly tried to restrain the tyrant but he lost his power after the murder of Agrippina, a crime which he had prevented once before. He died in 62 A.D. suspecting he had been poisoned. Thrasea, unlike these two teachers of Nero, refused to condone the crime of matricide. He attacked Nero in the Senate but finally in 66 A.D. he was condemned by that august body and, after a philosophic discourse celebrated with his friends by his side, he opened his veins.

is the glory and honor heaped upon influential favorites for their services by people who, if they could tear apart their living bodies, would still clamor for more, only half satiated by the agony they might behold. For even when the favorites are dead those who live after are never too lazy to blacken the names of these man-eaters with the ink of a thousand pens, tear their reputations into bits in a thousand books, and drag, so to speak, their bones past posterity, forever punishing them after their death for their wicked lives.

Let us therefore learn while there is yet time, let us learn to do good. Let us raise our eyes to Heaven for the sake of our honor, for the very love of virtue, or, to speak wisely, for the love and praise of God Almighty, who is the infallible witness of our deeds and the just judge of our faults. As for me, I truly believe I am right, since there is nothing so contrary to a generous and loving God as dictatorship — I believe He has reserved, in a separate spot in Hell, some very special punishment for tyrants and their accomplices.

its other quality, the burning. Moreover, even admitting that favorites may at times escape from the hands of him they serve, they are never safe from the ruler who comes after him. If he is good, they must render an account of their past and recognize at last that justice exists; if he is bad and resembles their late master, he will certainly have his own favorites, who are not usually satisfied to occupy in their turn merely the posts of their predecessors, but will more often insist on their wealth and their lives. Can anyone be found, then, who under such perilous circumstances and with so little security will still be ambitious to fill such an ill-fated position and serve, despite such perils, so dangerous a master? Good God, what suffering, what martyrdom all this involves! To be occupied night and day in planning to please one person, and yet to fear him more than anyone else in the world; to be always on the watch, ears open, wondering whence the blow will come; to search out conspiracy, to be on guard against snares, to scan the faces of companions for signs of treachery, to smile at everybody and be mortally afraid of all, to be sure of nobody, either as an open enemy or as a reliable friend; showing always a gay countenance despite an apprehensive heart, unable to be joyous yet not daring to be sad!

However, there is satisfaction in examining what they get out of all this torment, what advantage they derive from all the trouble of their wretched existence. Actually the people never blame the tyrant for the evils they suffer, but they do place responsibility on those who influence him; peoples, nations, all compete with one another, even the peasants, even the tillers of the soil, in mentioning the names of the favorites, in analyzing their vices, and heaping upon them a thousand insults, a thousand obscenities, a thousand maledictions. All their prayers, all their vows are directed against these persons; they hold them accountable for all their misfortunes, their pestilences, their famines; and if at times they show them outward respect, at those very moments they are fuming in their hearts and hold them in greater horror than wild beasts. This

him? It is because he does not know how to love that he ultimately impoverishes his own spirit and destroys his own empire.

Now if one would argue that these men fell into disgrace because they wanted to act honorably, let him look around boldly at others close to that same tyrant, and he will see that those who came into his favor and maintained themselves by dishonorable means did not fare much better. Who has ever heard tell of a love more centered, of an affection more persistent, who has ever read of a man more desperately attached to a woman than Nero was to Poppaea? Yet she was later poisoned by his own hand.<sup>47</sup> Agrippina his mother had killed her husband, Claudius, in order to exalt her son; to gratify him she had never hesitated at doing or bearing anything; and yet this very son, her offspring, her emperor, elevated by her hand, after failing her often, finally took her life.<sup>48</sup> It is indeed true that no one denies she would have well deserved this punishment, if only it had come to her by some other hand than that of the son she had brought into the world. Who was ever more easily managed, more naive, or, to speak quite frankly, a greater simpleton, than Claudius the Emperor? Who was ever more wrapped up in his wife than he in Messalina,<sup>49</sup> whom he delivered finally into the hands of the executioner? Stupidity in a tyrant always renders him incapable of benevolent action; but in some mysterious way by dint

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<sup>47</sup> She was really killed by a kick, according to Suetonius (*Life of Nero*, chap. 35) and Tacitus (*Annals*, Book XVI, chap. 6). She abetted Nero in many of his crimes; the murder of his mother, of his gentle wife Octavia. After the brutal death inflicted on Poppaea, Nero shed many tears.

<sup>48</sup> Suetonius, *op. cit.*, chap. 34, and Tacitus, *op. cit.*, Book XII, chap. 67.

<sup>49</sup> Messalina (15–48 A.D.) was the fifth wife of the emperor Claudius. At first honorable, mother of two children, she suddenly turned to vice and has transmitted her name to the ages as a synonym for the lowest type of degraded womanhood. While still the wife of Claudius, she married a favorite with his connivance. The Emperor, finally convinced of her treachery, permitted the killing of his wife and her lover. He then married Agrippina who persuaded him to adopt Nero as his son, thereby signing his own death warrant, for his new wife, by giving him a plate of poisonous mushrooms, opened the way for her son's succession to the throne.

of acting cruelly even towards those who are his closest associates, he seems to manifest what little intelligence he may have.

Quite generally known is the striking phrase of that other tyrant who, gazing at the throat of his wife, a woman he dearly loved and without whom it seemed he could not live, caressed her with this charming comment: "This lovely throat would be cut at once if I but gave the order."<sup>50</sup> That is why the majority of the dictators of former days were commonly slain by their closest favorites who, observing the nature of tyranny, could not be so confident of the whim of the tyrant as they were distrustful of his power. Thus was Domitian<sup>51</sup> killed by Stephen, Commodus by one of his mistresses,<sup>52</sup> Antoninus by Macrinus,<sup>53</sup> and practically all the others in similar violent fashion. The fact is that the tyrant is never truly loved, nor does he love. Friendship is a sacred word, a holy thing; it is never developed except between persons of character, and never takes root except through mutual respect; it flourishes not so much by kindnesses as by sincerity. What makes one friend sure of another is the knowledge of his integrity: as guarantees he has his friend's fine nature, his honor, and his constancy. There can be no friendship where there is cruelty, where there is disloyalty, where there is injustice. And in places where the wicked gather there is conspiracy only, not companionship: these have no affection for

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<sup>50</sup> Suetonius, *Life of Caligula*, Chapter 33.

<sup>51</sup> Suetonius, *Life of Domitian*, Chapter 17. The tyrant died in 96 A.D. after three years of bestial government inspired by abject fear of conspirators. Finally Domitia, his wife, hatched the plot which led an imperial slave to stab his royal master to death.

<sup>52</sup> Herodian, Book I, chap. 54. Commodus (161–192 A.D.) unworthy son of Marcus Aurelius, had planned to put to death his concubine, Marcia. She poisoned him first.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, Book IV, chap. 23. The reference is to Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Bassianus, better known as Caracalla, who was killed (217 A.D.) in a plot arranged by his own praetor, Macrinus, who succeeded him to power, lasted a year, and was killed in his turn by his own soldiers.

one another; fear alone holds them together; they are not friends, they are merely accomplices.

Although it might not be impossible, yet it would be difficult to find true friendship in a tyrant; elevated above others and having no companions, he finds himself already beyond the pale of friendship, which receives its real sustenance from an equality that, to proceed without a limp, must have its two limbs equal. That is why there is honor among thieves (or so it is reported) in the sharing of the booty; they are peers and comrades; if they are not fond of one another they at least respect one another and do not seek to lessen their strength by squabbling. But the favorites of a tyrant can never feel entirely secure, and the less so because he has learned from them that he is all powerful and unlimited by any law or obligation. Thus it becomes his wont to consider his own will as reason enough, and to be master of all with never a compeer. Therefore it seems a pity that with so many examples at hand, with the danger always present, no one is anxious to act the wise man at the expense of the others, and that among so many persons fawning upon their ruler there is not a single one who has the wisdom and the boldness to say to him what, according to the fable, the fox said to the lion who feigned illness: "I should be glad to enter your lair to pay my respects; but I see many tracks of beasts that have gone toward you, yet not a single trace of any who have come back."

These wretches see the glint of the despot's treasures and are bedazzled by the radiance of his splendor. Drawn by this brilliance they come near, without realizing they are approaching a flame that cannot fail to scorch them. Similarly attracted, the indiscreet satyr of the old fables, on seeing the bright fire brought down by Prometheus, found it so beautiful that he went and kissed it, and was burned; so, as the Tuscan<sup>54</sup> poet reminds us, the moth, intent upon desire, seeks the flame because it shines, and also experiences

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<sup>54</sup> Petrarch, *Canzoniere*, Sonnet XVII. La Boétie has accurately rendered the lines concerning the moth.