

On Liars

(Edited)

THERE is no man so unsuited for the task of speaking about memory as I am, for I find scarcely a trace of it in myself, and I do not believe there is another man in the world so hideously lacking in it. All my other faculties are poor and ordinary, but in this I think I am most rare and singular, and deserve to gain name and fame thereby.

Besides the natural inconvenience that I suffer on this account - for assuredly, considering how necessary it is, Plato was right in calling memory "a great and powerful goddess" - in my country, when they want to say that a man has no sense, they say that he has no memory, and when I complain of the shortcomings of my own, people correct me and refuse to believe me, as if I were accusing myself of being a fool. They can see no difference between memory and intellect.

This makes me look much worse off. But they wrong me, for experience shows that, on the contrary, excellent memories are often coupled with feeble judgments. They also wrong me in this, that the same words which indicate my infirmity, signify ingratitude as well - and I am nothing if I am not a good friend. They blame my affections instead of my memory, and turn in involuntary defect into a wilful one. "He has forgotten this request or that promise," they say. "He doesn't remember his friends. He did not remember to do this, to say that, or to keep quiet about the other, for my sake." Certainly I am prone enough to forgetfulness, but as for neglecting, out of indifference, a service which a friend has asked of me, that I do not do. Let them be content with my misfortune and not turn it into a kind of ill-will, a kind quite foreign to my character.

But I find some consolation, first because I have derived from this evil my principal argument against a worse evil which might have taken root in me; the evil of ambition. For lack of memory is an intolerable defect in anyone who takes on the burden of the world's affairs.

Then, as several similar examples of nature's workings show, she has generously strengthened other faculties in me in proportion as this one has grown weaker. I might easily have let my intelligence and judgment follow languidly in other men's footsteps, as all the world does, without exerting their own power, if other people's ideas and opinions had ever been present with me by favour of my memory.

Again, my speech is consequently briefer, for the storehouse of the memory is generally better stocked with material than that of the invention. If my memory had been good, I should have deafened all my friends with my chatter, since any subject that calls out such powers as I have of argument and development warms and extends my eloquence. This would have been lamentable, as I have learned in the case of some of my intimate friends. In proportion as their memory gives them a complete and first-hand view of their subject, so they push their narrative back into the past and burden it with useless details. If the story is a good one, they smother its virtues; if it is not, you curse their fortunate powers of memory or their unfortunate lack of judgment. Once one is well on the road, it is difficult to close a discourse and break it off. There is no better way of proving a horse's strength than by pulling him up short and sharp. Even among men who keep to the point, I find some who would like to break off but cannot. While they are searching for a place at which to stop, they go maundering and trailing on like a man who is losing strength. Particularly dangerous are old men who retain the memory of past events, but do not remember how often they have repeated them. I have known some very amusing tales to become most tiresome when told by some gentlemen whose whole audience has been sated with them a hundred times.

I find some consolation, also, in the reflection that I have, as Cicero said of Caesar, "a short memory for the injuries received." Like Darius, I should need a prompter. Wishing not to forget the insult he had suffered from the Athenians, the Persian King Darius made one of his servants repeat three times in his ear, each time he sat down to table: "Sire, remember the

Athenians”; and it consoles me too that the places I revisit and the books I re-read always smile upon me with the freshness of novelty.

Not without reason is it said that no one who does not have a sound memory should set up to be a liar. I know quite well that grammarians make a distinction between telling an untruth and lying. They say that to tell an untruth is to say something that is false, but that we suppose to be true, and that the meaning of the Latin *mentiri*, from which our French word for lying derives, is to go against one's conscience, and that consequently it applies only to those who say the opposite of what they know; and it is of them I am speaking.

Now liars either invent the whole thing, or they disguise and alter an actual fact. If they disguise and alter, it is hard for them not to get mixed up when they refer to the same story again and again because, the real facts having been the first to lodge in the memory and impress themselves upon it by way of consciousness and knowledge, they will hardly fail to spring into the mind and dislodge the false version, which cannot have as firm or assured a foothold. The circumstances, as they were first learned, will always rush back into the thoughts, driving out the memory of the false or modified details that have been added.

If liars make a complete invention, they apparently have much less reason to be afraid of tripping up, in as much as there is no contrary impression to clash with their fiction. But even this, being an empty thing that offers no hold, readily escapes from the memory unless it is a very reliable one. I have often had amusing proof of this, at the expense of those who profess to suit their speech only to the advantage of the business in hand, and to please the great men to whom they are speaking. The circumstances to which it is their wish to subordinate their faith and their conscience being subject to various changes, their language has also to change from time to time; and so they call the same thing grey one moment and yellow the next, say one thing to one man, and another to another. Then, if these listeners happen to bring all this contrary information together as a common booty, what becomes of all their fine art? Besides they trip up so often when they are off their guard. For what memory could be strong enough to retain all the different shapes they have invented for the same subject? I have seen many in my time who have desired a reputation for this subtle kind of discretion, not seeing that the reputation and the end in view are incompatible.

Lying is indeed an accursed vice. We are men, and we have relations with one another only by speech. If we recognized the horror and gravity of an untruth, we should more justifiably punish it with fire than any other crime. I commonly find people taking the most ill-advised pains to correct their children for their harmless faults, and worrying them about heedless acts which leave no trace and have no consequences. Lying - and in a lesser degree obstinacy - are, in my opinion, the only faults whose birth and progress we should consistently oppose. They grow with a child's growth, and once the tongue has got the knack of lying, it is difficult to imagine how impossible it is to correct it. Whence it happens that we find some otherwise excellent men subject to this fault and enslaved by it. I have a decent lad as my tailor, whom I have never heard to utter a single truth, even when it would have been to his advantage.

If, like the truth, falsehood had only one face, we should know better where we are, for we should then take the opposite of what a liar said to be the truth. But the opposite of a truth has a hundred thousand shapes and a limitless field.

The Pythagoreans regard good as certain and finite, and evil as boundless and uncertain. There are a thousand ways of missing the bull's eye, only one of hitting it. I am by no means sure that I could induce myself to tell a brazen and deliberate lie even to protect myself from the most obvious and extreme danger. St Augustine said that we are better off in the company of a dog we know than in that of a man whose language we do not understand. Therefore,

“those of different nations do not regard one another as men” — Pliny, Natural History

and how much less friendly is false speech than silence.