

– On Fear –

Obstupui, steteruntque comae, et vox faucibus haesit.

[I stood dumb with fear; my hair stood on end and my voice stuck in my throat.]

I am not much of a ‘natural philosopher’ – that is the term they use; I have hardly any idea of the mechanisms by which fear operates in us; but it is a very odd emotion all the same; doctors say that there is no emotion which more readily ravishes our judgement from its proper seat. I myself have seen many men truly driven out of their minds by fear, and it is certain that, while the fit lasts, fear engenders even in the most staid of men a terrifying confusion.

I leave aside simple folk, for whom fear sometimes conjures up visions of their great-grandfathers rising out of their graves still wrapped in their shrouds, or else of chimeras, werewolves or goblins; but even among soldiers, where fear ought to be able to find very little room, how many times have I seen it change a flock of sheep into a squadron of knights in armour; reeds or bulrushes into men-at-arms and lancers; our friends, into enemies; a white cross into a red one.

When Monsieur de Bourbon captured Rome, a standard-bearer who was on guard at the Burgo San

Pietro was seized by such terror at the first alarm that he leapt through a gap in the ruins and rushed out of the town straight for the enemy still holding his banner; he thought he was running into the town, but at the very last minute he just managed to see the troops of Monsieur de Bourbon drawing up their ranks ready to resist him (it was thought that the townsfolk were making a sortie); he realised what he was doing and headed back through the very same gap out of which he had just made a three-hundred-yards' dash into the battlefield.

But the standard-bearer of Captain Juille was not so lucky when Saint-Pol was taken from us by Count de Bures and the Seigneur de Reu; for fear had made him so distraught that he dashed out of the town, banner and all, through a gun-slit and was cut to pieces by the attacking soldiers. There was another memorable case during the same siege, when fear so strongly seized the heart of a certain nobleman, freezing it and strangling it, that he dropped down dead in the breach without even being wounded.

Such fear can sometimes take hold of a great crowd. In one of the engagements between Germanicus and the Allemani two large troops of soldiers took fright and fled opposite ways, one fleeing to the place which the other had just fled from.

Sometimes fear as in the first two examples puts wings on our heels; at others it hobbles us and nails our feet to the ground, as happened to the Emperor

Theophilus in the battle which he lost against the Agarenes; we read that he was so enraptured and so beside himself with fear, that he could not even make up his mind to run away: '*adeo pavor etiam auxilia formidat*' [so much does fear dread even help]. Eventually Manuel, one of the foremost commanders of his army, shook him and pulled him roughly about as though rousing him from a profound sleep, saying, 'If you will not follow me I will kill you; the loss of your life matters less than the loss of the Empire if you are taken prisoner.'

Fear reveals her greatest power when she drives us to perform in her own service those very deeds of valour of which she robbed our duty and our honour. In the first pitched battle which the Romans lost to Hannibal during the consulship of Sempronius, an army of ten thousand foot-soldiers took fright, but seeing no other way to make their cowardly escape they fought their way through the thick of the enemy, driving right through them with incredible energy, slaughtering a large number of Carthaginians but paying the same price for a shameful flight as they should have done for a glorious victory.

It is fear that I am most afraid of. In harshness it surpasses all other mischances. What emotion could ever be more powerful or more appropriate than that felt by the friends of Pompey who were aboard a ship with him and witnessed that horrible massacre of his forces? Yet even that emotion was stifled by their fear

of the Egyptian sails as they began to draw nearer; it was noticed that his friends had no time for anything but urging the sailors to strive to save them by rowing harder; but after they touched land at Tyre their fear left them and they were free to turn their thoughts to the losses they had just suffered and to give rein to those tears and lamentations which that stronger emotion of fear had kept in abeyance.

Tum pavor sapientiam omnem mihi ex animo expectorat.

[Then fear banishes all wisdom from my heart.]

Men who have suffered a good mauling in a military engagement, all wounded and bloody as they are, can be brought back to the attack the following day; but men who have tasted real fear cannot be brought even to look at the enemy again. People with a pressing fear of losing their property or of being driven into exile or enslaved also lose all desire to eat, drink or sleep, whereas those who are actually impoverished, banished or enslaved often enjoy life as much as anyone else. And many people, unable to withstand the stabbing pains of fear, have hanged themselves, drowned themselves or jumped to their deaths, showing us that fear is even more importunate and unbearable than death.

The Greeks acknowledged another species of fear over and above that fear caused when our reason is distraught; it comes, they say, from some celestial impulsion, without any apparent cause. Whole peoples have

been seized by it as well as whole armies. Just such a fear brought wondrous desolation to Carthage: nothing was heard but shouts and terrified voices; people were seen dashing out of their houses as if the alarm had been sounded; they began attacking, wounding and killing each other, as though they took each other for enemies come to occupy their city. All was disorder and tumult until they had calmed the anger of their gods with prayer and sacrifice.

Such outbursts are called 'Panic terrors'.