

Of Idleness

A short essay on minds left untilled—and what grows there.

BY MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE · TRANSLATED BY CHARLES COTTON

2 MIN READ

As we see some grounds that have long lain idle and untilled, when grown rich and fertile by rest, to abound with and spend their virtue in the product of innumerable sorts of weeds and wild herbs that are unprofitable, and that to make them perform their true office, we are to cultivate and prepare them for such seeds as are proper for our service; and as we see women that, without knowledge of man, do sometimes of themselves bring forth inanimate and formless lumps of flesh, but that to cause a natural and perfect generation they are to be husbanded with another kind of seed: even so it is with minds, which if not applied to some certain study that may fix and restrain them, run into a thousand extravagances, eternally roving here and there in the vague expanse of the imagination--

“Sicut aqua tremulum labris ubi lumen ahenis, Sole repperisum, aut radiantis imagine lunae, Omnia pervolat late loca; jamque sub auras Erigitur, summique ferit laquearia tecti.”

“As when in brazen vats of water the trembling beams of light, reflected from the sun, or from the image of the radiant moon, swiftly float over every place around, and now are darted up on high, and strike the ceilings of the upmost roof.”-- Aeneid, viii. 22.

--in which wild agitation there is no folly, nor idle fancy they do not light upon:--

“Velut aegri somnia, vanae Finguntur species.”

“As a sick man’s dreams, creating vain phantasms.”-- Hor., De Arte Poetica, 7.

The soul that has no established aim loses itself, for, as it is said--

“Quisquis ubique habitat, Maxime, nusquam habitat.”

“He who lives everywhere, lives nowhere.”--Martial, vii. 73.

When I lately retired to my own house, with a resolution, as much as possibly I could, to avoid all manner of concern in affairs, and to spend in privacy and repose the little remainder of time I have to live, I fancied I could not more oblige my mind than to suffer it at full leisure to entertain and divert itself, which I now hoped it might henceforth do, as being by time become more settled and mature; but I find--

“Variam semper dant otia mentem,”

“Leisure ever creates varied thought.”--Lucan, iv. 704

that, quite contrary, it is like a horse that has broke from his rider, who voluntarily runs into a much more violent career than any horseman would put him to, and creates me so many chimaeras and fantastic monsters, one upon another, without order or design, that, the better at leisure to contemplate their strangeness and absurdity, I have begun to commit them to writing, hoping in time to make it ashamed of itself.

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