

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 8



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Of Idleness

AS we see some Grounds that have long lain idle, and untill'd, when grown rank and fertile by rest, to abound with, and spend their Vertue, in the Product of innumerable sorts of Weeds, and wild Herbs, that are unprofitable, and of no wholesome use, 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 Men 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 Wits, which if not applied to some certain Study that may fix and restrain them, run into a thousand Extravagancies, and are eternally roving here and there in the inextricable Labyrinth of restless Imagination

*Sicut aqua tremulum labris ubi lumen ahenis,
Sole repercussum, aut radiantis imagine Lunæ,
Omnia pervolitat latè loca, jamque sub auras
Erigitur, summique ferit laquearia tecti.*

*Like as the quivering Reflexion
Of Fountain Waters, when the Morning Sun
Darts on the Bason, or the Moon's pale Beam
Gives light and Colour to the captive Stream,
Whips with fantastick motion round the place,
And Walls and Roof strikes with its trembling Rays.*

In which wild and irregular Agitation, there is no Folly, nor idle Fancy they do not light upon:

*uelut ægri somnia, uanæ
Finguntur species*

*Like Sick mens Dreams, that from a troubled Brain
Phantasms create, ridiculous and vain.*

The Soul that has no establish'd Limit to circumscribe it, loses it self, as the Epigrammist says,

Quisquis ubiq; habitat, maxime, nusquam habitat.

He that lives every where, does no where live.

When I lately retir'd my self 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 fanci'd I could not more oblige my mind than to suffer it at full leisure to entertain and divert itself, which I also now hop'd it might the better be entrusted to do, as being by Time and Observation become more settled and mature; but I find,

uariam semper dant otia mentem.

*Even in the most retir'd Estate
Leisure it self does various Thoughts create.*

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 *Chimæra's* and fantastick 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 themselves.