

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 8



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On Idleness

AS WE SEE thousands of wild and useless weeds of all sorts sprouting from untilled land, if it is rich and fertile, and understand that, to make it productive we must reclaim it and use it to sow what is useful to us; and as we see that women can, by themselves, produce clumps and bits of misshapen flesh but that to grow a fine and healthy baby another seed must be planted in them; so it is with minds. If they have no object to busy themselves with, something to check and restrain them, they will run free and ramble through the open field of wild ideas.

*¶ Sicut aquae tremulum labris ubi lumen ahenis
Sole repercussum, aut radiantis imagine Lunae,
Omnia peruolitat late loca, iamque sub auras
Erigitur, summiq; ferit laquearia tecti.*

And in this state of excitement, minds will come up with all kinds of foolishness and fantasies,

*¶ velut aegri somnia, vanae
Finguntur species.*

A soul with no fixed goal is sure to lose its way for, as they say, to be everywhere is to be nowhere.

¶ Quisquis ubique habitat, Maxime, nusquam habitat.

When I recently retired at home, I was determined, as much as I could, to stay out of things and to spend in peace and solitude whatever life I have left in me. I thought I could do my mind no greater favor than to let it be free, to leave it alone, to pause and focus on itself, all things I hoped I would be able to do more easily now that I have settled and become more mature. But I find

¶ variam semper dant otia mentem,

Just like sunlight, or the reflection of a bright moon, shimmering in copper basins full of water scatters in all directions and then bounces upward and hits the panels of a tall ceiling. • VERG., AEN., 8.22

Like a sick man's dreams inventing shapeless forms. • HOR., ARS P., 7

Whoever lives everywhere, Maximus, lives nowhere. • MART., 7.73

Idleness always gives rise to all kinds of thoughts. • LUC., 4.704

A that, on the contrary, like a runaway horse, my mind is far busier racing on its own than it ever was working for someone else. It invents for me so many wild chimeras and monsters, one after the other without order or purpose, that, to appreciate how ridiculous and strange they are, I have started to keep a list of them with which, in time, I hope to embarrass it.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Hor., Ars P.	Horace, <i>Art of Poetry</i>
Luc.	Lucan, <i>Civil War</i>
Mart.	Martial, <i>Epigrams</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>