Montaigne

BOOK ONE: Chapter 26

On the education of children

to Madame Diane de Foix, Comtesse de Gurson

I have never known a father refuse to acknowledge his son however scabby or deformed the boy may be. Yet this is not to say that, unless he is absolutely besotted by paternal affection, he does not perceive these defects, but the fact remains that it is his own son. I too see, better than anyone else, that these are only the idle musings of a man who in his youth just nibbled the outer crust of learning, and who has retained only a general and amorphous impression of it — a little of everything and nothing thoroughly, after the French fashion. In short, I know that there is a science of medicine, one of jurisprudence, and four divisions of mathematics, and also roughly what their purposes are. I know too, perhaps, how much the sciences in general have contributed to our lives. But as for plunging any deeper, or for biting my nails over the study of Aristotle, the monarch of modern learning, or stoutly pursuing any particular branch of knowledge, that I have never done. Nor is there any art of which I could sketch even the elementary outlines. There is no child in the middle forms who cannot lay claim to more learning than I, who am incapable of examining him in his first lessons. At least I cannot do so in due form and, if I must, am compelled, ineptly enough, to pick out some matter of general interest, and to judge his natural understanding by that; to give him a lesson, in fact, that is as strange to him as his lessons are to me.

I have never settled down to any solid book except Plutarch

*L ‘Whenever a thing changes and alters its nature, at that moment comes the death of what it was before.’ Lucretius, ii, 753, and iii, 519.*
and Seneca, into which I dip like the Danaids, filling and emptying my cup incessantly. Some part of my reading sticks to this paper, but to myself little or nothing sticks.

History is my favourite pursuit, or poetry, for which I have a special affection. For to quote Cleanthes, just as the voice, confined in the narrow channel of a trumpet, comes out sharper and stronger, so, in my opinion, a thought, compressed in the strict metres of verse, springs out more briskly and strikes me with a livelier impact. As for the natural faculties within me, of which my writing is the proof, I feel them bending under the burden. My ideas and my judgement merely grope their way forward, faltering, tripping, and stumbling; and when I have advanced as far as I can, I am still not at all satisfied. I can see more country ahead, but with so disturbed and clouded a vision that I can distinguish nothing. And when I venture to write indifferently of whatever comes into my head, relying only on my own natural resources, I very often light upon the matter I am trying to deal with in some good author, as I did just now in Plutarch, in his discourse on the strength of the imagination. Then I realize how weak and poor, how heavy and lifeless I am, in comparison with them,* and feel pity and contempt for myself.

Yet I take pleasure in the fact that my opinions have often the honour of coinciding with theirs and that I follow them, though far behind, proclaiming their virtues. I am glad too that I have the advantage, which many have not, of recognizing the great difference between them and myself. And yet I allow my own ideas to run their course, feeble and trivial as when I first conceived them, without plastering and patching the defects revealed to me by this comparison. A man must have strong legs if he intends to keep up with people like that. The injudicious writers of our century who scatter about their valueless works whole passages from old authors, in order to increase their own reputations, do just the reverse. For the infinitely greater brilliance of the ancients makes their own stuff look so pale, dull, and ugly that they lose much more than they gain.

Here are two contrary points of view. The philosopher

* Seneca and Plutarch.
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Chrysippus dropped into his books not just passages but whole works by other authors, including in one instance the complete *Medea* of Euripides; and Apollodorus said that if all that was not his own were to be cut out of his works the paper would be quite blank. Epicurus, on the other hand, did not introduce a single quotation into any of the three hundred volumes that he left behind him.

I happened the other day to light on such a passage.* I had been languidly following a string of French words, so bloodless, fleshless, and devoid of substance and meaning that they were just words of French and no more. Then at the end of this long and tiresome road I came upon a rich and lofty sentence which towered into the clouds. If I had found the slope gentle and the ascent somewhat gradual, it would have been excusable. But the rise was so sheer and precipitous that after the first six words I felt myself flying into another world, from which I recognized the depth of the abyss out of which I had come. So deep was it that I have never had the heart to plunge into it again. If I were to load one of my discourses with such rich spoils, it would throw too much light on the stupidity of the rest.

To censure my own faults in some other person seems to me no more incongruous than to censure, as I often do, another’s in myself. They must be denounced everywhere, and be allowed no place of sanctuary. I know very well how boldly I myself attempt at every turn to rise to the level of my purloinings and to remain there, even rashly hoping that I can prevent the judicial eye from discovering them. In this endeavour my industry plays as great a part as my inventive powers. And then, I do not contend with those ancient champions in the mass and hand to hand, but only in repeated brushes, in slight and trivial encounters. I do not press them hard; I merely try their strength and never go as far as I hesitatingly intend. If I could hold my own with them I should be doing well, for I only attack them at their strongest points.

To cover themselves, as I have seen some writers doing, so completely in other men’s armour as not to leave even their

* One in which the thought of an ancient author coincided with his own.
finger-tips showing; to compose a work from pieces gathered here and there among the ancients — an easy task for a man of learning who is treating an ordinary subject — and then to attempt to conceal the theft and pass it all off as their own; this is in the first place criminal and cowardly, in that having no private resources with which to make a display, they try to boost themselves with other men's wealth; and secondly, it is very foolish to be satisfied by gaining the ignorant approbation of the vulgar through trickery, while discrediting oneself in the eyes of the intelligent. For their praise alone carries any weight, and they turn up their noses at all this borrowed decoration. For my part, I would do anything rather than that. I only quote others to make myself more explicit.

This criticism does not apply to those *centos* which are published as such; and I have seen some very clever ones in my time, among them — not counting the ancients — one published under the name of Capilupus. There are talents that can reveal themselves as well in this way as in any other; Lipsius, for instance, in his learned and laborious compilation, the *Politics*.

Whatever my borrowings, I mean, and whatever my clumsiness, I have not set out to conceal them, any more than I would conceal a portrait of myself, bald and grizzled, in which the painter had presented no ideal countenance; I give them out as my own beliefs, not as what I expect others to believe. My sole aim is to reveal myself; and I may be different tomorrow if some new lesson changes me. I have no authority to exact belief, nor do I desire it, for I do not feel myself to be well enough instructed to instruct others.

Someone who had read the preceding chapter said to me at my house the other day that I ought to have enlarged a little on the subject of children's education. Well, Madame, if I had any competence on the subject, I could make no better use of it than to present it to that little man who threatens shortly to make a happy departure from your womb — for you have too noble a nature not to begin with a boy. Having played so large a part in the arrangement of your marriage, I have some right to be

*A poem manufactured from fragments of other poems.*
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interested in the greatness and prosperity of all that shall spring from it. Besides, I am bound by the old claim that you have on my service to desire the honour, welfare, and profit of everything that concerns you. But really I know nothing about the subject, except that the most difficult and important problem confronting human knowledge seems to be that of the right rearing and education of children.

Just as in agriculture the operations that precede planting, and the planting itself, are certain and easy, but once the plant has taken life there are a variety of ways of cultivation and many difficulties; so with men, it requires little skill to plant them, but once they are born, training them and bringing them up demands care of a very different kind, involving much fear and tribulation.

The evidence of their inclinations is so slight and obscure at that tender age, and their promise so uncertain and deceptive, that it is hard to arrive at any solid judgement of them. Look at Cimon, look at Themistocles and a thousand others, how greatly they belied their expectations! The young of bears and dogs show their natural dispositions. But men, falling immediately under the sway of custom, opinion, and law, easily change or assume disguises. Yet it is difficult to overcome the natural bent; and so it happens that, having chosen the wrong course, we often labour to no purpose, and spend much of our lives training children up to callings in which they cannot establish themselves. But my advice is that, this being a great difficulty, they should always be directed towards what is best and most profitable, and that we should pay little heed to the slight conjectures and prognostications which we base on their childish actions. Even Plato in his Republic seems to me to attach too much importance to them.

Learning is a great ornament, Madame, and a tool of marvellous utility, particularly to persons raised to such a degree of fortune as yours. In fact, in low and menial hands it is not properly employed. It takes much more pride in lending its powers to the conduct of a war, to the ruling of a people, to cultivating the friendship of a prince or a foreign nation, than...
in devoting itself to the composition of a dialectical argument, or in arguing an appeal, or in prescribing a packet of pills. So, Madame, I believe that you will not neglect this part of your children’s training, you who have savoured its pleasures and are yourself of a lettered race – for we still possess the books of those ancient Comtes de Foix from whom you and your husband are descended; and Bishop François de Candale, your uncle, every day produces more writings that will extend your family’s fame for these qualities by many centuries. But I should like to give you just one idea of my own on the subject. It is at variance with common usage, and it is all the service that I can offer you in this matter.

The functions of the tutor whom you will choose for your son, upon your choice of whom the whole success of his education depends, will involve many other important duties upon which I will not touch, since I cannot say anything of value about them; and on this one point about which I venture to offer him my advice, he should only trust me in so far as he sees reason to do so. In the case of a child of good family who seeks learning not for profit – for so low an aim is unworthy of the Muses’ grace and blessing, and anyhow depends on the cultivation of other men’s favour – and not so much for external advantages as for his own good, and for his inward enrichment and adornment – one, in fact, who is more anxious to become an accomplished man than a scholar – I should wish great care to be taken in the selection of a guide with a well-formed rather than a well-filled intellect. One should look for a man who has both, but should put good morals and understanding before book-learning, and should require him to fulfil his functions in a new way.

The usual way is to bawl into a pupil’s ears as if one were pouring water into a funnel, and the boy’s business is simply to repeat what he is told. I would have the tutor amend this state of things, and begin straight away to exercise the mind that he is training, according to its capacities. He should make his pupil taste things, select them, and distinguish them by his own powers of perception. Sometimes he should prepare the way
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for him, sometimes let him do so for himself. I would not have him start everything and do all the talking, but give his pupil a turn and listen to him. Socrates, and after him Arcesilaus, made his pupils speak first and then spoke to them. 'The authority of those who teach is very often a hindrance to those who wish to learn.'*

It is well for a tutor to make his charge trot in front of him, so that he may judge his pace and decide to what extent he should himself hold back to keep in step with him. If this adjustment is not made we spoil everything. But to strike the right proportion and duly to conform with it is one of the hardest tasks that I know. It takes a lofty and very powerful mind to conform with a child's gait and to guide it. I walk with a steadier and firmer step uphill than down. When, according to our common practice, a teacher undertakes to school several minds of very different structure and capacity with the same lessons and the same measure of guidance, it is no wonder that, among a whole multitude of children, he scarcely finds two or three who derive any proper profit from their teaching.

A tutor must demand an account not just of the words of his lesson, but of their meaning and substance, and must judge of its benefit to his pupil by the evidence not of the lad's memory but of his life. He must make him consider what he has just learnt from a hundred points of view and apply it to as many different subjects, to see if he has yet understood it and really made it his own; and he must judge his pupil's progress by Plato's dialectical method. It is a sign of rawness and indigestion to disgorge our meat the moment we have swallowed it. The stomach has not performed its function if it has not changed the condition and character of what it was given to digest.

Our minds never work except on trust; they are bound and controlled by their appetite for another man's ideas, enslaved and captivated by the authority of his teaching. We have been so subjected to our leading-strings that we have lost all freedom of movement. Our vigour and independence are extinct. *They

* Cicero, De Natura Deorum, i, v.
neither cease to be under guidance.* I had some private conversa-
tion at Pisa with an excellent man, but such an Aristotelian as
to accept as his universal dogma, that the touchstone and mea-
sure for all sound opinion and all truth is its conformity with
the teaching of Aristotle, and that outside this there is nothing
but illusions and inanities. He believes that Aristotle saw and
said everything. This standpoint, somewhat too broadly and
unfairly interpreted, once brought him, and for a long time kept
him, in great danger from the Inquisition at Rome.

The tutor should make his pupil sift everything, and take
nothing into his head on simple authority or trust. Aristotle's
principles must no more be principles with him than those of
the Stoics or the Epicureans. Let their various opinions be put
before him; he will choose between them if he can; if not, he
will remain in doubt. Only fools are certain and immovable.

Che non men che sapper dubbiar m'aggrada.†

For if he embraces the opinions of Xenophon and Plato by his
own reasoning, they will no longer be theirs but his. Who fol-
 lows another follows nothing. He finds nothing, and indeed
is seeking nothing. We are not under a king; each man should
look after himself.'‡ Let him know what he knows at least; he
must imbibe their ways of thought, not learn their precepts;
and he may boldly forget, if he will, where he has learnt his
opinions, so long as he can make them his own. Truth and
reason are common to all men, and no more belong to the man
who first uttered them than to him that repeated them after him.
It is no more a matter of Plato's opinion than of mine, when he
and I understand and see things alike. The bees steal from this
flower and that, but afterwards turn their pilferings into honey,
which is their own; it is thyme and marjoram no longer. So the
pupil will transform and fuse together the passages that he
borrows from others, to make of them something entirely his
own; that is to say, his own judgement. His education, his
labour, and his study have no other aim but to form this.

* Seneca, Letters, xxxiii.
† 'It pleases me as much to doubt as to know.' Dante, Inferno, xi, 93.
‡ Seneca, Letters, xxxiii.
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Let him conceal all that has helped him, and show only what he has made of it. Plunderers and borrowers make a display of their buildings and their purchases, not of what they have taken from others. You do not see a high-court judge's perquisites; you see the alliances he has made and the honours he has won for his children. Nobody renders a public account of his receipts; everyone displays his profits. The profit from our studies is to become better and wiser men.

It is the understanding, said Epicharmus, that sees and hears: it is the understanding that turns everything to profit, that arranges everything, that acts, directs, and rules: everything else is blind, deaf, and soulless. Certainly we make it servile and cowardly by refusing it the liberty to do anything for itself. Has anyone ever asked his pupil what he thought of rhetoric or grammar, or of this or that sentence from Cicero? Our masters stuff these things into our memory, fully feathered, like oracles in which the letters and syllables are the substance of the matter. Knowing by heart is no knowledge; it is merely a retention of what has been given into the keeping of the memory. What we really know we can make use of without looking at the model, without turning our eyes to the book. How poor is the proficiency that is merely bookish! I would have it be an ornament, not a foundation; and this was Plato's opinion when he said that firmness, faith, and sincerity are the true philosophy, and that other sciences that are directed to other ends are just face-painting.

I should like to see Paluel or Pompey, those splendid dancers of our day, teaching us capers merely by demonstrating them to us while we sit in our seats, as these men set out to inform our understanding without setting it to work. I should like to see us taught to manage a horse, or a pike, or a lute, or to sing, without any practice, as these men try to teach us to form a sound judgement and to speak well without exercising us either in judgement or in speech. For the instruction that I propose anything that we witness will serve as sufficient book; a page's trick, a servant's stupidity, a conversation at table, are so many fresh subjects.
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Human society is wonderfully adapted to this end, and so is travel in foreign countries, not merely for the sake of recording, as our French nobles do, the exact measurements of the Holy Rotunda, or the embroidery on Signora Livia’s drawers, or of noting, like some others, how much longer or broader the face of Nero is on some old ruin than on a medal of equal antiquity, but for the principal purpose of discovering the characteristics and customs of the different nations, and of rubbing and polishing our wits on those of others. I should like a boy to be sent abroad very young; and first, in order to kill two birds with one stone, to those neighbouring countries whose languages differ most from our own, and to which the tongue cannot adapt itself if it is not trained early.

It is also a generally accepted opinion that it is wrong for a child to be reared in its parents’ lap; their natural affection makes them too soft and tender, even the wisest of them. Parents are incapable of punishing a child’s faults, or of letting him be brought up roughly and carelessly, as he should be. They cannot bear to see him come back sweating and dusty from his exercise, or drinking when he is hot or when he is cold, or see him on a restive horse, or facing a skilful fencer, foil in hand, or handling his first musket. But there is no help for it; if one wants to make him into a man of parts, one must certainly not spare him in youth and must often transgress the laws of medicine.

vitamque sub dio et trepidis agat
in rebus.*

It is not enough to harden his mind; we must also toughen his muscles. The mind will suffer too much strain if it is not backed up; it is too much for it to perform a double function alone. I know how mine labours in the company of a most delicate and sensitive body that leans so heavily upon it. Often in my reading I have found my masters commending as models of great-heartedness and high courage men who were more remarkable, I believe, for a tough skin and hard bones. I have seen men, women, and children so constituted by nature that a

* ‘To live under the open sky, and among dangers.’ Horace, Odes, iii, ii, 5.
beating to them is less than a flick of the finger to me, and who do not utter a sound or blink an eyelid under the blows they receive. When athletes ape the endurance of philosophers, it is rather out of strong nerves than a steadfast heart. To be used to hard labour is to be used to pain: for ‘Labour hardens us against pain’. A boy must be broken in to the discomfort and hardship of exercise, in preparation for the discomfort and hardship of a dislocation, the colic, cauteries, gaol, and torture. For he might fall a victim even to these last two which, as the times are, threaten the good as well as the bad. We are experiencing this at the present day, for when people fight against the law, even the best of men are threatened with a whipping and the halter.

Moreover, the tutor’s authority, which ought to be supreme with the child, is checked and hindered by the presence of parents. I might add too that the respect paid to him by the household, and his consciousness of the power and greatness of his house are, in my opinion, considerable disadvantages at that age.

In this school of human intercourse there is one vice that I have often noted: instead of paying attention to others, we make it our whole business to call attention to ourselves, and are more concerned to sell our wares than to acquire a new stock. Silence and modesty are very proper qualities in human relations. The boy will be trained to be sparing and economical with his accomplishments, when he has acquired them, and not to contradict the idle sayings or silly stories that are spoken in his presence. For it is both rude and tiresome to quarrel with everything that is not to our liking. He should be content to correct himself, and not seem to condemn in others everything that he would not himself do, or to set himself up in opposition to general custom. ‘A man can be wise without display and without arousing enmity.’† Let him avoid these overbearing and discourteous airs, also the puerile ambition of trying to appear cleverer because he is different, and of getting a name for censoriousness and originality. As it is unbecoming for any but

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a great poet to indulge in the licences of his art, so it is intolerable for any but great and illustrious minds to claim any unusual privileges. 'Because a Socrates and an Aristippus acted contrary to general usage and custom, one must not suppose that one is similarly privileged; only their great and godly virtues authorized this liberty.'*

The pupil must be taught only to enter into conversation or discussion where he sees a champion worthy of his steel, and even then not to use all the resources that may help him, but only those that will serve him best. He should be trained to choose and sift his arguments with subtility, also to be a lover of pertinence, and so of brevity. But above all, he should be taught to yield to the truth, and to lay down his arms as soon as he discovers it, whether it appear in his opponent's argument, or to himself in his own second thoughts. For he will not be sitting in a professorial chair to repeat a set lecture. He will be pledged to no cause except in so far as he approves it; nor will he be of that profession in which the freedom to repent and think again is sold for good ready money. 'No necessity compels him to defend all that is prescribed and enjoined.'†

If his tutor be of my way of thinking he will school him to be a very loyal, devoted, and courageous servant to his prince. But he will discourage any desire he may have to attach himself to that master except out of public duty. Not to speak of the many other ways in which our liberty is prejudiced by these personal obligations, either the judgement of a man who is bought and receives wages must be less free and honest, or he will be taxed with indiscretion and ingratitude. A courtier can have neither the right nor the will to think or speak other than favourably of a master who has chosen him from among his many thousand subjects to be fostered and advanced by his own hand. This favour and advantage will, not unreasonably, impair his freedom and bedazzle him. Therefore we generally find such people talking a language different from any other spoken in the state, and find them to be untrustworthy in state affairs.

* Cicero, De Officiis, i, 41. † Cicero, Academica, ii, 5.
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The pupil's conscience and virtue should shine out in his speech, and should take reason alone for their guide. It must be explained to him that to admit any mistake he may find in what he has said, even though no one has noticed it but himself, is an act of good judgement and sincerity, the chief virtues that he is pursuing; that obstinacy and contentiousness are common qualities, generally to be found in the meanest minds; and that to change one's opinion and correct oneself, to give up a false position at the climax of a heated exposition, is a rare, strong, and philosophical virtue.

He must be warned that when in company he should have his eyes everywhere. For I find that the highest places are usually seized by the least capable men, and that great fortune and ability are seldom found together. I have been present when those at the head of the table were chatting about the tapestry or the taste of the malmsey, while many fine sayings were lost at the other end. He must sound every man's capacity. A herdsman, a mason, a passing stranger, he must draw upon them all and borrow from each according to his wares, for everything has some household use. Even other men's folly and weakness will be instructive to him. By noting each one's graces and manners, he will foster in himself a liking for good manners and a dislike for bad.

Let an honest curiosity be instilled in him, so that he may inquire into everything; if there is anything remarkable in his neighbourhood let him go to see it, whether it is a building, a fountain, a man, the site of an ancient battle, or a place visited by Caesar or Charlemagne:

Quae tellus sit lenta gelu, quae putris ab aestu,
ventus in Italiam qui bene veia ferat.*

Let him inquire into the characters, resources, and alliances of this prince and that. Such things are very interesting to learn, and very useful to know.

In this study of man I would have him include, most particularly, those men who live only by the memories they have

* 'What land is benumbed with cold, what land crumbling with heat, and which is the fair wind that blows towards Italy.' Propertius, iv, iii, 39.
It was the only study, as Plato tells us, that the Lacedaemonians thought worth while. What profit will he not reap in this respect by reading the *Lives* of our favourite Plutarch? But let his tutor remember the purpose of his duties, and impress upon his pupil the qualities of Hannibal and Scipio rather than the date of the fall of Carthage, and not so much where Marcellus died as why it was inconsistent with his duty that he should die there. Let him be taught not so much the facts of history as how to judge them. It is, I believe, of all subjects the one to which our minds apply themselves in the most various ways. I have read a hundred things in Livy that another has not. Plutarch read a hundred more in him than ever I have found, or than the historian ever put in, perhaps. To some it is a purely grammatical study, to some the anatomy of philosophy by which the deepest parts of our nature can be explored.

There are in Plutarch many extended reflections that richly deserve study. He is, in my opinion, the master craftsman in this field. But there are a thousand others on which he barely touches; he merely points with his finger to the way that we can go, if we please, and is sometimes content to make a single thrust at the heart of a question. We must draw out his points and bring them to full view. Take as an example, that remark of his that the peoples of Asia were subject to one man because they did not know how to pronounce the single syllable, No; which perhaps gave la Boétie the idea and the material for his *Voluntary Servitude*. Only to see Plutarch pick out some slight action in a man's life, or a remark that seems of no significance, is a treatise in itself. It is a pity that men of understanding are so fond of brevity; no doubt their reputations profit by it, but the loss is ours. Plutarch would rather have us applaud his judgement than his knowledge; he prefers to leave us not satiated but still hungry for more. He knew that even on the greatest subjects too much can be said, and that Alexandridas was right to reproach the man who made an excellent speech before the
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Ephors, but was too long-winded. 'Stranger,' he said, 'what you say is right, but you are saying it in the wrong way.' Men that have thin bodies stuff them out with padding; those whose substance is slender puff it out with words.

Mixing with the world has a marvellously clarifying effect on a man's judgement. We are all confined and pent up within ourselves, and our sight has contracted to the length of our own noses. When someone asked Socrates of what country he was he did not reply, 'of Athens', but 'of the world'. His was a fuller and wider imagination; he embraced the whole world as his city, and extended his acquaintance, his society, and his affections to all mankind; unlike us, who look only under our own feet. When the vines in my village are nipped by the frost, my priest immediately argues that God is angry with the human race, and concludes that the Cannibals must already be stricken with the pip. Who does not cry out at the sight of our civil wars, that the fabric of the world is being overthrown, and that Judgement Day has us by the throat? He fails to reflect that many worse things have happened, and that people are thoroughly enjoying themselves in ten thousand other parts of the world just the same. For myself, when I consider the licence and impunity with which these wars are fought, I am surprised to find them so mild and restrained. When hailstorms are falling on a man's head, he thinks that the whole hemisphere has been struck by a raging tempest. And a Savoyard used to say that if that fool of a French king had known how to look after his interests, he might have become steward to the Duke of Savoy. The man's imagination could conceive no grandeur more exalted than his master's. Unconsciously, we all make this mistake; a most harmful mistake with serious consequences. But whoever calls to his mind, as in a picture, the great image of our mother nature in all her majesty; whoever reads in her face her universal and constant variety; whoever sees himself in it, and not only himself but a whole kingdom, like a dot made by a very fine pencil; he alone estimates things according to their true proportions.

This great world, which some still reckon to be but one
example of a whole genus, is the mirror into which we must look if we are to behold ourselves from the proper standpoint. In fact, I would have this be my pupil’s book. So many dispositions, sects, judgements, opinions, laws, and customs teach us to judge sanely of our own, and teach our understanding how to recognize its imperfections and natural weaknesses; which is no trivial lesson. So many national revolutions and changes of public fortune teach us to consider our own no great miracle. So many names, so many victories, so many conquests buried in oblivion, render ridiculous our hope of eternalizing our own names by the capture of ten insignificant troopers or of a hen-roost, known only by the fact of its fall. The pride and arrogance of so much foreign display, the swollen majesty of so many courts and great houses, steadies us and enables our eyes to endure the brilliance of our own without blinking. All those millions of men buried before our time encourage us not to fear our departure to another world where we shall find so much good company. And so with all the rest.

Our life, said Pythagoras, is like the great and crowded assembly at the Olympic games. Some exercise the body in order to win glory in the contests; others bring merchandise there to sell for profit. There are some – and these are not the worst – whose only aim is to observe how and why everything is done, and to be spectators of other men’s lives, in order to judge and regulate their own.

Fit examples can be chosen for all the most profitable teachings of philosophy to which human actions ought to be referred, as to a standard. Our pupil should be told:

*quid fas optare, quid asper*

*utile nummus habet, patriae carisque propinquis*

*quantum elargiri debeat, quem te deus esse*

*iussit et humana qua parte locatus es in re,* ...

*quid sumus et quidnam victuri gignimur,*

*‘What it is right to desire, what hard-earned money is useful for, how much should be bestowed on country and dear kindred, what sort of man God intended you to be, and for what place in the commonwealth he marked you out ... what we are and what life we are born to lead.’ Persius, *Satires*, iii, 69-72 and 67.*
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what it is to know and not to know, what the aim of his study should be; what courage, temperance, and justice are; what the difference is between ambition and greed, servitude and submission, licence and liberty; by what signs one may recognize genuine and solid contentment; to what extent we should fear death, suffering, and shame,

*Et quo quemque modo fugiasque feratisque laborem,*

by what springs we move; and the reason for all the different impulses within us. For it seems to me that the first ideas which his mind should be made to absorb must be those that regulate his behaviour and morals, that teach him to know himself, and to know how to die well and live well.

Among the liberal arts, let us start with the one that makes us free. They are all of some service in teaching us how to live and employ our lives, as is everything else to a certain extent. But let us choose the one that serves us directly and professedly. If we knew how to restrict our life-functions within their just and natural limits, we should find that most of the branches of knowledge in current usage are valueless to us; and that even in those which are valuable, there are quite profitless stretches and depths which we should do better to avoid. Following Socrates’ instructions, we must limit the extent of our studies in those branches which are lacking in utility.

*sapere aude:

incipe, qui recte vivendi prorogat horam, rusticus expectat dum defluat amnis: at ille labitur et labetur in omne volubilis aevum.*

It is very foolish to teach our children

*Quid moveant Pisces animosaeque signa Leonis, lotus et Hesperia quid Capricornus aqua,*

*And how to avoid or endure each kind of hardship.' Virgil, Aenid, iii, 459 (rightly fugiasque ferasque).

*‘Dare to be wise! Begin now. The man who puts off the day when he will live rightly is like the peasant who waits for the river to drain away. But it flows on, and will flow on for ever.' Horace, Epistles, i, ii, 40.

*‘What is the influence of Pisces, and of the fierce constellation of the Lion, and of Capricorn bathed in the Hesperian Sea.' Propertius, iv, i, 85.*
the science of the stars and the movement of the eighth sphere before we teach them their own.

_Ti πλειάδεσι κάμοι_

_Ti ὅστράσι βοώτεω._*  

Anaximenes wrote to Pythagoras: 'How can I meditate on the secrets of the stars when I have death or slavery always before my eyes?' For at that time the kings of Persia were preparing a war against his country. Everyone should ask himself this question: 'Beset as I am by ambition, avarice, temerity, and superstition, and having so many other enemies of life within me, shall I start speculating about the motions of the world?'

After the pupil has been told what serves to make him wiser and better, he must be taught the purpose of logic, physics, geometry, and rhetoric: his judgement once formed, he will very soon master whichever branch he may choose. His instruction should be given him sometimes verbally, sometimes by book; sometimes his tutor will put into his hands the author most suitable for that part of his instruction; sometimes he will give him the marrow and substance of the volume ready prepared. And if he is not himself familiar enough with books to find all the fine passages in them that suit his purpose, some man of letters can be associated with him who can supply him with the necessary provisions to be dealt and dispensed to his pupil. Who can doubt that this way of teaching is easier and more natural than that of Gaza?† His precepts are thorny and disagreeable, his words empty and fleshless, giving you nothing to catch hold of, nothing to rouse the spirits. But in the new method, the mind has something to bite and feed on. Its fruit is incomparably greater, and yet will be much sooner ripe.

It is a great pity that things have reached such a pass in our age, and that philosophy is now, even to men of intelligence, a vain and chimerical name, a thing of no use or value either in the popular opinion or in reality. The cause, I think, lies in these

* "What do I care about the Pleiades or the constellation of the Ploughman?" Anacreon, Odes, xvii, 10.

† Theodorus Gaza (1398–1478), a Greek scholar, the author of a grammar and translator of Aristotle.
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quibblings which have blocked the approach to it. It is very wrong to describe it to children as the unapproachable study, and as frowning, grim, and terrible of aspect. Who has disguised it in this wan and hideous mask? Nothing can be gayer, more agile, more cheerful, and I might almost say more sportive. It preaches nothing but jollity and merry-making. A sad and dejected air shows that here philosophy is not at home. When Demetrius the grammarian found a bunch of philosophers seated together in the temple at Delphi, he said to them: 'To judge by your serene and cheerful faces, I should say that you are engaged in no deep discourse.' To which one of them, Heracleon of Megara, replied: 'It is for those who inquire whether the future of the verb βῆλλω should have a double λ, or who seek the derivation of the comparatives χείρων and βέλτιον, and of the superlatives χείριστον and βέλτιστον to wrinkle their brows as they discuss their subject. But philosophical conversation quickly enlivens and delights those who take part in it; it does not depress them or make them sad.'

Deprendas animi tormenta latentis in aegro corpore, deprendas et gaudia; sumit utrumque inde habitum factes.*

The mind that harbours philosophy should, by its soundness, make the body sound also. It should make its tranquillity and joy shine forth; it should mould the outward bearing to its shape, and arm it therefore with a gracious pride, with an active and sprightly bearing, with a happy and gracious countenance. The most manifest sign of wisdom is a constant happiness; its state is like that of things above the moon: always serene. It is Baroco and Baralipont† that make their servants so dirty and smoke-begrimed; not philosophy, which they know only by hearsay. Why, philosophy's object is to calm the tempests of the soul, to teach hunger and fever how to laugh, not by a few imaginary epicycles‡ but by natural and palpable arguments!

* 'You can detect the mental torments concealed within a sick body, and you can also detect joy: the face reflects both states.' Juvenal, Satires, ix, 18.
† Terms of the old scholastic logic.
‡ Scientific term of the sixteenth century.
Its aim is virtue, which does not, as the schoolmen allege, stand on the top of a sheer mountain, rugged and inaccessible. Those who have approached it have found it, on the contrary, dwelling on a fair, fertile plateau, from which it can clearly see all things below it. But anyone who knows the way can get there by shady, grassy, and sweetly flowering paths, pleasantly and up an easy and smooth incline, like that of the vault of heaven. Through unfamiliarity with this sovereign, beautiful, triumphant virtue, which is both delicate and courageous, which is the professed and irreconcilable enemy of bitterness, trouble, fear, and constraint; and which has nature for guide, and good-fortune and delight for companions, they have created in their feeble imaginations this absurd, gloomy, querulous, grim, threatening, and scowling image, and placed it on a rock apart, among brambles, as a bogey to terrify people.

My tutor, who knows that he should fill his pupil’s mind as much – or rather more – with affection for virtue than with respect for it, will tell him that poets have the feelings of common men. He will give him palpable proof that the gods have made it a sweatier toil to approach to the chambers of Venus than those of Minerva. Then when the lad comes to be self-critical, and is offered the choice between Bradamante and Angelica* as a mistress to be enjoyed – a natural, vigorous, spirited beauty, not mannish but manly, in contrast to a soft, affected, delicate, and artificial one, the former dressed as a boy, with a glittering helmet on her head, the latter in girlish clothes and adorned with a pearl head-dress – his tutor will judge even his love to be a manly one if he differs entirely in his choice from the effeminate shepherd of Phrygia.†

He will then teach his pupil this new lesson: that the value and height of true virtue lies in the ease, the profit, and the pleasure of its practice, which is so far from being difficult that it is within the reach of children as well as men, of the simple as well as the subtle. Moderation as its instrument, not force. Socrates, virtue’s first favourite, deliberately renounced all

* See Ariosto, Orlando furioso.
† Paris, who chose Venus rather than Juno or Minerva.
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effort, to glide towards her by natural and easy stages. She is the foster-mother of human joys. By making them righteous, she makes them certain and pure; by moderating them, she keeps them in breath and appetite; by cutting off those that she rejects, she whets our desire for those that she leaves us and, like a mother, she leaves us an abundance of all those that nature requires, even to satiety, if not to exhaustion; unless, perhaps, we choose to say that the authority which stops the drinker short of drunkenness, the eater short of indigestion, and the lecher before he loses his hair, is an enemy to our pleasures. If common happiness plays her false, virtue rises above it or does without it, or makes another happiness of her own, that is neither fickle nor unsteady. She knows how to be rich, powerful, and learned, and to lie on perfumed beds. She loves life; she loves beauty, glory, and health. But her proper and peculiar function is to know how to use these good things in a disciplined way, and how to be steadfast when she loses them: a duty that is noble rather than laborious, and without which the whole course of life is unnatural, turbulent, and distorted. Lack of virtue is the most plausible reason for the rocks, brambles, and phantoms with which life is strewn.

If the pupil proves to be of so perverse a disposition that he would rather listen to some idle tale than to the account of a glorious voyage or to a wise conversation, when he hears one; if he turns away from the drum-beat that awakens young ardour in his comrades, to listen to another tattoo that summons him to a display of juggling; if he does not fervently feel it to be pleasanter and sweeter to return from a wrestling-match, dusty but victorious, with the prize in his hand, than from a game of tennis or a ball, I can see no other remedy than for his tutor to strangle him before it is too late, if there are no witnesses. Alternatively, he should be apprenticed to a pastry-cook in some substantial town, even if he is the son of a duke, in compliance with Plato’s precept, that children should be placed not according to their father’s qualities but to the qualities of their own minds.

Since it is philosophy that teaches us how to live, and child-
hood, like other ages, has lessons to learn from it, why are children never instructed in it?

_Usum et molle lutum est, nunc nunc properandum et acri fingendus sine fine rota._

When life is over, we are taught to live. A hundred scholars have caught the pox before coming to read Aristotle _On Temperance_. Cicero used to say that though he should live two men's lives he would never have the leisure to read the lyric poets; and I consider those sophists even more deplorably useless. Our pupil has much less time to spare: he owes the pedagogues only the first fifteen or sixteen years of his life; the rest he owes to action. Let us devote this very short time to the necessary instruction. Away with all these thorny subtleties of dialectic, by which our life cannot be improved; they are wasteful. Take the simple arguments of philosophy, learn how to pick them and make fit use of them; they are easier to understand than a tale by Boccaccio. A newly weaned child is more capable of doing this than of learning to read or write. Philosophy has teachings for man at his birth as well as in his decrepitude.

I agree with Plutarch, that Aristotle did not waste his great pupil's time on lessons in the construction of syllogisms, or on the principles of geometry, but taught him wise precepts on the subject of valour, prowess, magnanimity, temperance, and that assurance which knows no fear; and he sent him out thus provided, while still a boy, to conquer the Empire of the world with only 30,000 foot-soldiers, 4000 horsemen, and 42,000 crowns. As for the other arts and sciences, says Aristotle, Alexander honoured them no doubt, and praised their virtues and attractions; but as for taking pleasure in them himself, he was not easily surprised by any desire to practise them.

_Le petite puerque senesque
finem animo certum miserisque viatica canis._

This is what Epicurus said, at the beginning of his letter to

* ‘The clay is moist and soft, let us hasten and shape it on the sharp, revolving wheel.’ Persius, _Satires_, iii., 23.
† ‘Young men and old, take from here, a fixed aim for your minds, and provide for the wretchedness of old age.’ Persius, _Satires_, v., 64.
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Meniceus: 'Let not the youngest shun philosophy or the oldest grow weary of it. To do so is equivalent to saying either that the time for a happy life has not yet come or that it is already past.'

For all these reasons I would not have our pupil kept a prisoner. I would not have him given over to the melancholy humours of a hot-tempered schoolmaster. I do not want to spoil his mind by keeping it, as others do, always on the rack, toiling for fourteen or fifteen hours a day like a porter. Nor should I approve if, out of a solitary and brooding disposition, he were to apply himself immoderately to the study of his books. Were I to see this propensity in him, I should not encourage it. It unfits boys for social intercourse, and deflects them from better occupations. How many men have I seen in my time brutalized by this uncontrolled avidity for learning! Carneades was so besotted with it that he had no time to look after his hair or his nails. Neither should I wish the pupil's noble manners to be spoilt by contact with the incivility and barbarism of others. French wisdom was once proverbial for taking root early but having little hold. We still find, in fact, that there is nothing so charming in France as the young children. But they generally disappoint the hopes that are conceived of them, and when they are grown men we find them to excel in nothing. I have heard men of understanding maintain that it is the colleges to which they are sent — of which there is such an abundance — that make them into such brutes.

For our pupil, a little room, a garden, table and bed, solitude, company, morning and evening; all hours shall be alike to him, and all places will be his study. For philosophy, since it is the moulder of judgement and manners, shall be his principal lesson; and it has the privilege of entering everywhere. When Isocrates the orator was asked at a banquet to speak about his art, everyone thought him right to reply: 'Now is not the time for what I can do, and what it is now time to do I cannot do.' For to offer harangues or rhetorical disputations to a company assembled for laughter and merry-making, would be to create a most unseemly discord; and the same might be said of all other
forms of learning. As for philosophy, however, in so far as it treats of man, his duties and functions, all sages have agreed that its conversation is too charming for it ever to be denied admission to feasts or to sports. When Plato invited Philosophy to his Banquet, we see how pleasantly she discoursed to the company, in a fashion suitable to the time and place, although this is one of his loftiest and most salutary Dialogues.

Aequa pauperibus prodest, locupletibus aequa, et, neglecta, aequa fuere semibusque nocet.*

Thus, doubtless, he will have fewer holidays than the rest. But as the steps that we take walking in a gallery may be three times as many, but tire us less than if they were taken on a fixed journey, so our lessons, occurring as it were accidentally, without being bound to time or place, and mingling with all our other actions, will glide past unnoticed. Even games and exercises will form a good part of his study: running, wrestling, music, dancing, hunting, the management of horses and of weapons. I would have the pupil’s outward graces, his social behaviour, and his personal demeanour, formed at the same time as his mind. It is not a soul or a body that one is training, but a man; the two must not be separated. And, as Plato says also, we must not train one without the other, but must drive them side by side, like a pair of horses harnessed to the same shaft. When we listen to him, does he not seem to devote more time and more care to the exercise of the body, and to reckon that the mind will get its exercise at the same time, rather than vice versa?

For the rest, this education ought to be conducted with a gentle severity, and not as it is at present. Instead of being invited to study, children are now confronted with terror and cruelty. Away with violence and compulsion! There is nothing, in my opinion, that is so debasing and stupefying to a noble nature. If you want him to fear shame and punishment, do not inure him to them. Inure him to sweat and to cold, to wind, to sun, and to dangers, which he should despise. Rid him of all

* ‘It is equally profitable to poor and rich and, to neglect it, will harm boys and old men alike.’ Horace, Epistles, 1, i, 25.
fastidiousness and delicacy in regard to his clothes and his bed, his food and his drink. Accustom him to everything. He must be no pretty boy, no fancy fellow, but a sturdy, vigorous young man. I have always been of this opinion, in childhood, in manhood, and in old age.

The discipline of most of our schools has always been a thing of which I have disapproved. If they had erred on the side of indulgence, they might have erred less lamentably. But they are veritable gaols in which imprisoned youth loses all discipline by being punished before it has done anything wrong. Visit one of these colleges when the lessons are in progress; you hear nothing but the cries of children being beaten and of masters drunk with anger. What a way of arousing an appetite for learning in these young and timid minds, to lead them to it with a terrifying visage and an armful of rods! This is a wicked and pernicious system. Besides, as Quintilian very well observed, such imperious authority has some very dangerous consequences, particularly in the matter of punishment. How much more fitting it would be if the classrooms were strewn with flowers and leaves than with bits of bloodstained switches! I would have my school hung with pictures of Joy and Gladness, and of Flora and the Graces, as the philosopher Speusippus had his. Where their profit is, let their pleasure be also. One should sweeten the food that is healthy for a child, and dip what is harmful in gall. It is remarkable how solicitous Plato shows himself in his *Laws* for the pleasure and amusement of the youth of his city, and how much attention he pays to their races, games, songs, leapings, and dancings, the ordering and patronage of which he says the ancients gave to the gods themselves: to Apollo, the Muses, and Minerva. He dwells on a thousand precepts for his *gymnasia*, but pays very little attention to literary studies. Poetry in particular he recommends chiefly for the music’s sake.

Anything singular or idiosyncratic in our habits and bearing should be avoided as an impediment to social intercourse, and as unnatural as well. No one could fail to be astonished by the constitution of Alexander’s steward Demophon, who sweated
in the shade and shivered in the sun. I have seen men run from
the smell of an apple more rapidly than from a volley of
musketry, others frightened by a mouse, others vomit at the
sight of cream, and others at the making of a feather-bed; and
Germanicus could not endure the sight or the crowing of cocks.
There may perhaps be some occult influence in all this, but I
think it could be dispelled if taken in good time. Training has
done so much for me — though not without some trouble, it is
true — that, except for beer, my stomach accommodates itself
indifferently to anything it is offered. While the body is still
pliable, therefore, one ought to condition it to all fashions and
customs. Provided that we can keep a young man's will and
appetites under control, let us boldly make him used to all
nations and all countries, to irregularity and excess, if need be.
In his practice he should follow custom. He should be able to
do everything, but only like doing what is good. Even philo-
sophers do not find it praiseworthy in Callisthenes that he for-
feited the favour of his master, Alexander the Great, by refusing
to keep up with him in drinking. He should laugh and sport and
debauch himself with his prince. Even in his debauches I would
have him surpass his companions in vigour and persistency,
and refrain from evil-doing not from lack of strength or skill,
but only from lack of inclination. 'There is a great difference
between a man who does not want to sin and one who does not
know how to.'*

I thought I was honouring a certain nobleman who is as far
removed from such excesses as any man in France, when I asked
him, in good company, how many times in his life he had got
drunk in Germany in the interest of the King's business. Taking
this in the right spirit, he answered 'Three times', and told us
the circumstances. I know some who through lack of that
faculty have got into great difficulties when they had to deal
with Germans. I have often reflected most admiringly on the
wonderful constitution of Alcibiades, who adapted himself so

* Seneca, Letters, xc. This paragraph was condemned by the Sacred
College in Rome, when Montaigne was there in 1580. He promised to
correct it, but did not do so.
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easily to very diverse customs without injury to his health, sometimes outdoing the Persians in pomp and luxury, sometimes the Lacedaemonians in austerity and frugality. He was as much the ascetic in Sparta as in Ionia he was the voluptuary;

\[\text{Omnis Aristippum decuit color, et status, et res.}\]

I would train my pupil as one,

\[\text{quem duplici panno patientia velat}
\text{mirabor, vitae via si conversa dceebit,}
\text{personamque forei non inconcinus utramque.}\]

These are my precepts; they will be more profitable to the man who puts them into practice than to the man who merely learns them. If you see him, you listen to him; if you listen to him, you see him. ‘God forbid,’ says someone in Plato, ‘that to philosophize should mean simply to learn a number of things and discuss the arts!’ ‘Instruction in right living, the most fruitful of all the arts, is to be gained by life itself rather than by study.’†

When asked by Leo, prince of the Phalasians, what science or art he professed, Heraclides of Pontus answered: ‘I know neither science nor art, but am a philosopher.’ Someone reproached Diogenes for being ignorant yet dabbling in philosophy. ‘That makes me all the fitter to dabble in it,’ he replied. Hegesias begged him to read him some book. ‘You are joking,’ said he, ‘you prefer real, natural figs to painted ones. Why do you not also prefer real and natural exercises to written ones?’

Our pupil should not so much say his lesson as perform it. He should repeat it in his actions. We shall then see whether there is any wisdom in his plans, any goodness and justice in his conduct, any judgement and grace in his speech, any fortitude in his bearing of sickness, any moderation in his amusements, any temperance in his pleasures, any indifference in his

* ‘Every condition, situation, and circumstance fitted Aristippus.’ Horace, Epistles, 1, xvii, 23.
† ‘Who after carefully dressing himself in a lined garment, can change his way of life, and can play both roles with equal ease. Such a man I admire,’ Horace, Epistles, xvii, 25–6 and 29.
‡ Cicero, Tusculans, iv, iii.
taste for flesh, fish, wine, or water, any order in his expenditure, and whether he ‘regards what he is taught not in the light of knowledge, but as a rule of life, whether he is his own master and obeys his own principles’. The conduct of our lives is the true reflection of our thoughts.

When asked why the Lacedaemonians did not commit the rules of bravery to writing and give them to their young people to read, Zeuxidamus answered that it was because they wanted to accustom them to deeds not words. Compare such a pupil, after fifteen or sixteen years, to one of these college Latinists, who will have spent as much time in simply learning to speak. The world is all babble, and I have never met a man who did not talk more, rather than less, than he should; yet half our lives are wasted in this way. They keep us four or five years learning words and stringing them together in clauses; as many more building them up into a long speech, duly divided into four or five parts; and another five, at least, learning to mingle them succinctly and weave them together in some subtle fashion. Let us leave this to those who make a special profession of it.

One day, on my way to Orléans, I met in the open country this side of Cléry, two Masters of Arts, travelling fifty paces apart towards Bordeaux. A little way behind them I saw a troop of horsemen with their captain at their head - it was the late Comte de la Rochefoucault. One of my men inquired of the leading scholar who the gentleman was that was coming after him. Not having observed the company in the rear, he thought that I was referring to his colleague, and replied facetiously, ‘He is not a gentleman, but a grammarian; and I am a logician.’

But our object is, on the contrary, not to make a grammarian, or a logician, but a gentleman. So we should leave them to their time-wasting. We have business elsewhere. Our pupil should be well supplied with things, and the words will follow only too freely; if they do not come of their own accord, he will force them to do so. I hear some people apologize for their inability to express themselves, and pretend to have their heads full of good things which they cannot bring out through lack of

* Cicero, Tusculan, ii, iv.
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elegance. This is a delusion. Do you know what I think? These are shadows cast upon their minds by some half-shaped ideas which they cannot disentangle and clear up inwardly, and therefore are unable to express outwardly; they do not yet understand themselves. Only watch them stammering on the point of parturition, and you will see that their labour is not at the stage of delivery but of conception. They are only licking a formless embryo. I personally believe—and with Socrates it is axiomatic—that anyone who has a clear and vivid idea in his mind will express it, either in rough language, or by gestures if he is dumb:

*Verbaque provisam rem non invita sequuntur.*

And as another author said just as poetically in prose, 'When things have seized the mind, the words come of themselves.'† And yet another, 'The subject itself seizes on the words.'‡ He knows no ablative, subjunctive, substantive, or grammar; neither does his servant, or a fishwife on the Petit Pont. Yet they will give you your fill of talk if you will listen, and will very likely make no more mistakes in the linguistic rules than the best Master of Arts in France. He knows no rhetoric, nor how, by way of preface, to capture the benevolence of the candid reader; nor has he any wish to do so. In fact, all such fine tricks are easily eclipsed by the light of a simple, artless truth. These refinements serve only to divert the vulgar, who are incapable of swallowing solider and stronger food, as Afer§ very clearly shows in Tacitus. The Samian ambassadors had come to Cleomenes, King of Sparta, prepared with a fine long speech urging him to declare war against the tyrant Polycrates. After hearing them to the end, the Spartan King gave them their answer: 'As for your introduction and exordium, I no longer remember them, or the middle of your speech either; and as for your conclusion, I will do nothing of the sort.' There is a fine answer, I think, with the speechoifiers well rebuffed.

* 'When the matter is ready the words will follow freely.' Horace, Art Poetica, 311.
† Seneca, Dialogues, iii, Introduction.
‡ Cicero, De Finibus, iii, v.
§ Properly Aper. Montaigne is misconstruing a passage in the Dialogue on Orators.
And what of this other example? The Athenians had to choose one of two architects to put up a great building. The first and more plausible came forward with a finely prepared speech on the subject of the projected work and swung the popular opinion in his favour. But the second used no more than three words: ‘Noble Athenians, what this man has said I will do.’

When Cicero was at the height of an eloquent harangue, many were moved to admiration. But Cato only said with a laugh: ‘We have an amusing consul.’ A useful thought or a good stroke of wit is always seasonable, whether it comes early or late. If it does not fit either what goes before it or what follows, still it is good in itself. I am not one of those who think that good rhythm makes a good poem. Let the poet make a short syllable long, if he will; it is no great matter. If the idea is pleasing, if thought and judgement have played their part well, then I will say, ‘Here’s a good poet, but a bad versifier.’

_Eminctae naris, durus componere versus._

Let a poet’s work, says Horace, lose all its measures and joints,

*tempora certa modasque, et quod prius ordine verbum est*
_posterius facias, praeponens ultima primis,*
_invenias etiam disiecti membra poetae._

its character will not be changed by this; even the fragments will be beautiful.

When Menander was reproved because the day on which he had promised to deliver a comedy was drawing near and he had not yet started to write it, he replied to similar effect: ‘It is composed and ready; all that remains is to fit it with verses.’ Having the subject and material prepared in his mind, he thought very little of the rest. Since Ronsard and du Bellay have established

*‘His nose is good, but he composes harsh verses.’ Horace, _Satires,_ i, v, 8.
†‘Take away the rhythm and the metre, and put the first word last and the last first; still the scattered limbs are those of a poet.’ Horace, _Satires,_ i, v, 58–9 and 62.*
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the reputation of our French poetry, every little novice, it seems to me, puffs up his words and manages his cadences almost as well as they. ‘It is more sound than sense.’* In the popular opinion there were never so many poets before. But while it has been quite easy for lesser men to reproduce their rhythms, they fall very far short of imitating Ronsard’s rich descriptions and the delicate thought of du Bellay.

Yes, but what if our pupil is confronted with the sophistical subtlety of some syllogism? ‘Ham makes one drink, drink quenches thirst, therefore ham quenches thirst.’ Why, he should laugh at it. There is more subtlety in that laugh than in any answer. Let him borrow this amusing counter-finesse from Aristippus: ‘Why should I untie it since it is tiresome enough tied up?’ When someone advanced some dialectical subtleties against Cleanthes, Chrysippus said: ‘Keep those tricks for playing on children. Do not divert the serious thoughts of a mature man with such stuff.’ If these absurd quibbles, these ‘involved and subtle fallacies’† are likely to persuade him of a falsehood, that is dangerous; but if their only effect on him is to move him to laughter, I do not see why he need be on his guard against them. There are some men who are so foolish as to go a good mile out of their way in pursuit of a witty remark, or who, ‘instead of suiting their words to their subject drag in extraneous matters, to which their words will fit’.‡ And as another author says, ‘There are some who are tempted by the charm of an attractive phrase to write about something they had not intended.’§ I prefer to twist a good saying in order to weave it into my argument, rather than twist my argument to receive it. Far from that, it is the business of words to serve and follow, and if French will not do it, Gascon may. I would have the subject be paramount, and so fill the hearer’s mind that he has no memory of the words. The speech that I love is a simple and natural speech, the same on paper as on a man’s lips: a pithy, sinewy, short, and concise speech, sharp and forcible rather than mincing and delicate:

* Seneca, Letters, XL. † Cicero, Academica, II, 24. ‡ Quintilian, VIII, iii. § Seneca, Letters, LIX.
BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 26

Haec demum sapit dictio, quae ferit,*

rather rough than tedious, void of all affectation, free, irregular and bold; not pedantic, not friar-like, not lawyer-like, but soldierly rather, as Suetonius says Julius Caesar's was, though I do not see very well why he calls it so.

I have been in the habit of copying the careless manner of dress adopted by our young men: the cloak worn negligently with the hood over one shoulder, and the stockings ungartered; which shows a proud contempt for all foreign adornments and a careless neglect of artifice. But I find this carelessness still better applied to the method of speech. All affectation is unbecoming in the courtier, especially in France where we are so gay and so free; and in a monarchy every nobleman ought to model himself on the fashion of the Court. We do well, therefore, to incline a little towards the artless and negligent.

I do not like a texture in which the joints and seams are visible, just as in a lovely body one should not be able to count the bones and the veins. 'Speech aids truth in so far as it is unstudied and natural.'† 'Who makes a study of speech except the man who wishes to talk affectedly?'‡ Eloquence is harmful to the subject when it calls our attention to itself.

Just as in dress, any attempt to make oneself conspicuous by adopting some peculiar and unusual fashion is the sign of a small mind, so in language, the quest for new-fangled phrases and little-known words springs from a puerile and pedantic pretension. I wish that I could limit myself to the language of the Paris markets. Aristophanes the grammarian was off the mark when he criticized Epicurus for the simplicity of his language and the purpose of his rhetoric, which was simply to make his speech plain. The imitation of speech is so easy that a whole people follows a new mode immediately; but the imitation of opinions and ideas does not proceed so fast. When the ordinary reader discovers a similarity of dress, he most mistakenly thinks that he is dealing with a similar body. Strength and sinews cannot be borrowed; the attire and the cloak may be.

* 'Striking speech is good speech.' Epitaph of Lucan.
† Seneca, Letters, xl. ‡ op. cit., lxxv.
ON THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN

The majority of those who consort with me talk like these essays of mine, but I do not know whether they have the same thoughts.

The Athenians, says Plato, pay particular attention to copiousness and elegance of speech; the Lacedaemonians aim at brevity; and the Cretans at fertility of thought rather than of language: the last are the best. Zeno used to say that he had two kinds of disciples: one that he called φιλολόγοι, curious to learn things, who were his favourites; and the other λογοφίλοι, who were concerned only with the words. This is not to say that good expression is not a fine and excellent thing; but it is not as excellent as it is made out to be, and it vexes me that our whole life should be devoted to it. I would wish first to know my own language well, and that of my neighbours with whom I have most dealings. Greek and Latin are undoubtedly an admirable ornament, but we buy them too dearly. I will describe here a method of getting them at less than the usual price, which was tried in my case. Let anyone make use of it who will.

My late father, in his search for a perfect method of education, made every inquiry that a man can among scholars and men of judgement, and was apprised of the disadvantages of the method then in use. He was told that the length of time we spend in learning tongues which cost the ancients none is the sole reason for our failure to reach the spiritual and intellectual grandeur of the Greeks and Romans. I do not believe that this is the sole reason. However, the expedient that my father found was this: while I was at nurse and before the first loosing of my tongue, he put me in charge of a German, totally ignorant of our language and very well versed in Latin. He later became a famous physician here in France, where he died. This man, whom he had engaged for the purpose at a very high salary, carried me around constantly; and with him he had two others less learned, to look after me and relieve him. None of them spoke to me in any language but Latin. As for the rest of the house, it was an inviolable rule that neither my father nor my mother, nor any manservant or maid, should utter in my presence anything but such Latin words as each of them had learned in order to chat
with me. It was wonderful how much they all profited by this. My father and mother picked up enough Latin to understand it, and acquired sufficient skill to speak it at need; and so did those members of the household who had most to do with my upbringing. In fact, we were so Latinized that it spread to the villages round about us, where one still hears some craftsmen and their tools called by Latin names that have taken root by usage. As for me, I was over 6 before I understood any more French or Périgordian than I did Arabic. Without system, without books, without grammar or rules, without whipping, and without tears, I learnt a Latin as pure as my master's own, for I had no way of adulterating or confusing it. If, by way of test, they wanted to give me a theme, as is done in colleges, whereas other boys are given theirs in French, mine had to be given to me in bad Latin, to be turned into good. And Nicholas Groucchi, who wrote De comitiis Romanorum, Guillaume Guerente, the commentator on Aristotle, George Buchanan, the great Scottish poet, and Marc-Antoine Muret, whom France and Italy recognize as the best orator of our day, who were my private tutors, have often told me that in my childhood I had the language so readily at my disposal that they were shy of starting a conversation with me. Buchanan, whom I afterwards met in the suite of the late Marshal de Brissac, told me that he was then writing a book on the education of children, and that he was taking mine as a pattern. He was tutor at the time to that Comte de Brissac who has since shown himself so brave and so valiant.

As for Greek, of which I have hardly any knowledge at all, my father planned to have me taught it artificially, but by a new method, as an amusement and an exercise. We tossed our declensions to and fro in the manner of those who learn arithmetic and geometry by certain table games. For amongst other things, he had been advised to make me relish learning and duty not by forcing my inclinations but by leaving me to my own desires, and to train my mind in all gentleness and freedom, without rigour or constraint. He did this, let me say, to such an over-scrupulous degree that, because some hold that it troubles
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the tender brains of children to wake them in the morning with a start, and rouse them suddenly and violently out of their sleep — which is much deeper with them than with us — he used to have me woken by the playing of some instrument; and he was never without a man who could do this for me.

This detail which serves as an example of all the rest, speaks eloquently too for the wisdom and affection of my very good father, who must by no means be blamed if the fruits he gathered did not correspond to such meticulous cultivation. There were two reasons for this. In the first place, a sterile and unsuitable soil; for although I had strong and sound health, and with it a mild and tractable disposition, yet I was at the same time so heavy, sluggish, and drowsy that they could not rouse me from my idleness even to play. What I saw, I saw clearly, and beneath my heavy disposition harboured bold ideas and opinions in advance of my age. But I had a slow mind that would go no further than it was led, a tardy understanding, a weak imagination, and, worst of all, an incredibly defective memory. It is no wonder that my father could extract little that was of value from all this.

In the second place, like those who are urged by a frantic desire for a cure and so follow all sorts of advice, the good man was so afraid of failing in a project so close to his heart that he finally allowed himself to be carried away by the common opinion which, like the cranes, always follows anyone that takes the lead. He conformed to custom. Having no longer around him the persons who had given him his first ideas, which he had back from Italy, he sent me at the age of about 6 to the College of Guienne, which was then very flourishing and the best in France. Here he took every possible care in the choice of competent private tutors, and over all the other details of my education, reserving for me a number of special privileges contrary to the usage of schools. But for all that, it was still a school. My Latin immediately grew corrupt, and through lack of practice I have since lost all use of it. The only service that this new method of education did me was to let me skip the lower classes at the beginning. For when I left the school, at 13, I had finished
BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 26

the course — as they call it — and really without any benefit that I can now note in its favour.

The first taste that I had for books came to me from my pleasure in the fables of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. For, at the age of 7 or 8, I would steal away from every other amusement to read them, because the book was written in my mother tongue, and was the easiest that I knew, and because, owing to its subject-matter, it was the best suited to my tender years. As for the Lancelots of the Lake, the Amadises, the Huons of Bordeaux, and other such trashy books as children waste their time on, I did not so much as know their names; and even now I do not know their contents, so strict was my discipline. I became more negligent, therefore, in the study of my other prescribed lessons. But here I was extremely lucky in having a man of intelligence as my tutor, for he was clever enough to connive at this irregularity of mine and at others of the same nature. Thus it was that I ran straight through Virgil’s *Aeneid*, then Terence, then Plautus, and some Italian comedies, always lured on by the charm of the subject. Had he been foolish enough to interrupt this pursuit of mine, I think I should have come away from school, like almost all young noblemen, with nothing but a detestation of books. He behaved with great ingenuity, and pretended to see nothing. Thus by allowing me to feast on these books only by stealth and keeping me gently to my task in my other, regular studies, he sharpened my appetite. The principal qualities that my father sought in those into whose charge he put me, were friendliness and an easy disposition. For my only faults of character being sloth and idleness, the danger was, not that I should do wrong, but that I should do nothing. Nobody prophesied that I should become wicked, but merely useless. They foresaw a distaste for work, but no mischief.

I am conscious that it has turned out as they predicted. The complaints that resound in my ears are to this effect: ‘Lazy, indifferent to the bonds of friendship and kinship, and to public duties; too withdrawn.’ The most critical do not say: ‘Why did he take that? Why did he not pay for it?’, but, ‘Why does he not fulfil expectations? Why does he give nothing?’ I ought to be
thankful that I am found wanting only in such acts of supererogation. But it is unjust of them to demand of me what I do not owe, much more rigorously than they ask of themselves what they do owe. By that demand, they deny the gratuitous character of my action, and so refuse me the thanks that should be my due. For active well-doing ought to count for more, coming from me, seeing that I am under no obligation whatever. I am the freer to dispose of my fortune for its being all my own. However, if I were a great blazoner of my own deeds, I could perhaps rebut these reproaches, and point out to some of my critics that what offends them is not so much my failure to do enough, but the fact that I could do much more than I do.

Yet all this time my mind was vigorously and ceaselessly active on its own account; it made clear and confident judgements on subjects within its knowledge and digested them alone, communicating them to nobody. And, among other things, I believe that it would have been truly incapable of yielding to force and violence.

Shall I add to the reckoning a certain faculty of my childhood: the power of commanding my expression, and suiting my voice and gestures to any part that I undertook? For, in advance of my years,

*Alter ab undecimo tum me iam acciperat annus.*

I had played the chief parts in the Latin tragedies of Buchanan, Guerente, and Muret, of which dignified performances were given in our College of Guienne. In this, as in all other branches of his duties, our principal, Andreas Goveanus, was incomparably the best principal in France, and I was considered a first-class performer. Acting does not seem to me an unsuitable pastime for children of good family; and I have seen our princes lend themselves to it in person, after the example of some of the ancients, in a most honourable and commendable way. In Greece it was even permissible for men of quality to make acting their profession: 'He confided in Ariston, the tragic actor, a man of good family and fortune, whose calling did not

* 'I had hardly reached the age of twelve.' Virgil, Eclogues, viii, 40.
prejudice his position, for it is not considered disgraceful among the Greeks.*

I have always thought it unreasonable to condemn this amusement, and unjust to refuse entrance into our large cities to actors who are worth seeing, thus begrudging the populace a public entertainment. Wise administrators take care to assemble and unite their citizens, not only for the serious duties of religion, but for sports and spectacles as well, to the enhancement of good-fellowship and friendship among them. And no more orderly amusements could be found for them than those that take place with everyone present and beneath the eye of the magistrate himself. For my part, I should think it reasonable if the magistrate and the prince were sometimes to give the people a show at their own expense, out of paternal kindness and affection, and if in populous cities there should be places appointed and set apart for these spectacles— as a diversion from worse actions performed in secret.

To return to my subject, there is nothing like tempting the appetite and the interest; otherwise we shall produce only book-laden asses. With strokes of the birch we put a pocketful of learning into our pupils' keeping. But if it is to be of any use, it should not merely be kept within. It should be indissolubly wedded to the mind.