

The Complete Essays of
MONTAIGNE

Translated by
DONALD M. FRAME

Stanford University Press
Stanford, California

ing a mass of pills. Thus, Madame, because I think you will not forget this element in the education of your children, you who have tasted its sweetness and who are of a literary race (for we still have the writings of those ancient counts of Foix from whom his lordship the count your husband and yourself are descended; and François, Monsieur de Candale, your uncle, every day brings forth others, which will extend for many centuries the knowledge of this quality in your family), I want to tell you a single fancy of mine on this subject, which is contrary to common usage; it is all that I can contribute to your service in this matter.

The task of the tutor that you will give your son, upon whose choice depends the whole success of his education, has many other important parts, but I do not touch upon them, since I cannot offer anything worth while concerning them; and in this matter on which I venture to give him advice, he will take it only as far as it seems good to him. For a child of noble family who seeks learning not for gain (for such an abject goal is unworthy of the graces and favor of the Muses, and besides it looks to others and depends on them), or so much for external advantages as for his own, and to enrich and furnish himself inwardly, since I would rather make of him an able man than a learned man, I would also urge that care be taken to choose a guide with a well-made rather than a well-filled head; that both these qualities should be required of him, but more particularly character and understanding than learning; and that he should go about his job in a novel way.

Our tutors never stop bawling into our ears, as though they were pouring water into a funnel; and our task is only to repeat what has been told us. I should like the tutor to correct this practice, and right from the start, according to the capacity of the mind he has in hand, to begin putting it through its paces, making it taste things, choose them, and discern them by itself; sometimes clearing the way for him, sometimes letting him clear his own way. I don't want him to think and talk alone, I want him to listen to his pupil speaking in his turn. ^cSocrates, and later Arcesilaus, first had their disciples speak, and then they spoke to them. *The authority of those who teach is often an obstacle to those who want to learn* [Cicero].

It is good that he should have his pupil trot before him, to judge the child's pace and how much he must stoop to match his strength. For lack of this proportion we spoil everything; and to be able to hit it right and to go along in it evenly is one of the hardest tasks that I know; it is the achievement of a lofty and very strong soul to know how to come down to a childish gait and guide it. I walk more firmly and surely uphill than down.

If, as is our custom, the teachers undertake to regulate many minds of such different capacities and forms with the same lesson and a similar measure of guidance, it is no wonder if in a whole race of children they find barely two or three who reap any proper fruit from their teaching.

^ALet him be asked for an account not merely of the words of his lesson, but of its sense and substance, and let him judge the profit he has made by the testimony not of his memory, but of his life. Let him

be made to show what he has just learned in a hundred aspects, and apply it to as many different subjects, to see if he has yet properly grasped it and made it his own, ^cplanning his progress according to the pedagogical method of Plato. ^aIt is a sign of rawness and indigestion to disgorge food just as we swallowed it. The stomach has not done its work if it has not changed the condition and form of what has been given it to cook.

^bOur mind moves only on faith, being bound and constrained to the whim of others' fancies, a slave and a captive under the authority of their teaching. We have been so well accustomed to leading strings that we have no free motion left; our vigor and liberty are extinct. ^c*They never become their own guardians* [Seneca]. ^bI had a private talk with a man at Pisa, a good man, but such an Aristotelian that the most sweeping of his dogmas is that the touchstone and measure of all solid speculations and of all truth is conformity with the teaching of Aristotle; that outside of this there is nothing but chimeras and inanity; that Aristotle saw everything and said everything. This proposition, having been interpreted a little too broadly and unfairly, put him once, and kept him long, in great danger of the Inquisition at Rome.

^aLet the tutor make his charge pass everything through a sieve and lodge nothing in his head on mere authority and trust: let not Aristotle's principles be principles to him any more than those of the Stoics or Epicureans. Let this variety of ideas be set before him; he will choose if he can; if not, he will remain in doubt. ^cOnly the fools are certain and assured.

^aFor doubting pleases me no less than knowing.

DANTE

For if he embraces Xenophon's and Plato's opinions by his own reasoning, they will no longer be theirs, they will be his. ^cHe who follows another follows nothing. He finds nothing; indeed he seeks nothing. *We are not under a king; let each one claim his own freedom* [Seneca]. Let him know that he knows, at least. ^aHe must imbibe their ways of thinking, not learn their precepts. And let him boldly forget, if he wants, where he got them, but let him know how to make them his own. Truth and reason are common to everyone, and no more belong to the man who first spoke them than to the man who says them later. ^cIt is no more according to Plato than according to me, since he and I understand and see it in the same way. ^aThe bees plunder the flowers here and there, but afterward they make of them honey, which is all theirs; it is no longer thyme or marjoram. Even so with the pieces borrowed from others; he will transform and blend them to make a work that is all his own, to wit, his judgment. His education, work, and study aim only at forming this.

^cLet him hide all the help he has had, and show only what he has made of it. The pillagers, the borrowers, parade their buildings, their purchases, not what they get from others. You do not see the gratuities of a member of a Parlement, you see the alliances he has gained and

honors for his children. No one makes public his receipts; everyone makes public his acquisitions.

The gain from our study is to have become better and wiser by it.

^AIt is the understanding, Epicharmus used to say, that sees and hears; it is the understanding that makes profit of everything, that arranges everything, that acts, dominates, and reigns; all other things are blind, deaf, and soulless. Truly we make it servile and cowardly, by leaving it no freedom to do anything by itself. Who ever asked his pupil what he thinks ^Bof rhetoric or grammar, or ^Aof such-and-such a saying of Cicero? They slap them into our memory with all their feathers on, like oracles in which the letters and syllables are the substance of the matter. ^CTo know by heart is not to know; it is to retain what we have given our memory to keep. What we know rightly we dispose of, without looking at the model, without turning our eyes toward our book. Sad competence, a purely bookish competence! I intend it to serve as decoration, not as foundation, according to the opinion of Plato, who says that steadfastness, faith, and sincerity are the real philosophy, and the other sciences which aim at other things are only powder and rouge.

^AI wish Paluel or Pompey,² those fine dancers of my time, could teach us capers just by performing them before us and without moving us from our seats, as those people want to train our understanding without setting it in motion; ^Cor that we could be taught to handle a horse, or a pike, or a lute, or our voice, without practicing at it, as those people want to teach us to judge well and to speak well, without having us practice either speaking or judging.

^ANow, for this apprenticeship, everything that comes to our eyes is book enough: a page's prank, a servant's blunder, a remark at table, are so many new materials.

For this reason, mixing with men is wonderfully useful, and visiting foreign countries, not merely to bring back, in the manner of our French noblemen, knowledge of the measurements of the Santa Rotonda, or of the richness of Signora Livia's³ drawers, or, like some others, how much longer or wider Nero's face is in some old ruin there than on some similar medallion; but to bring back knowledge of the characters and ways of those nations, and to rub and polish our brains by contact with those of others. I should like the tutor to start taking him abroad at a tender age, and first, to kill two birds with one stone, in those neighboring nations where the language is farthest from our own and where the tongue cannot be bent to it unless you train it early.

Likewise it is an opinion accepted by all, that it is not right to bring up a child in the lap of his parents. This natural love makes them too tender and lax, even the wisest of them. They are capable neither of chastising his faults nor of seeing him brought up roughly, as he should

² Ludovico Palvalli and Pompeo Diobono, two famous Milanese dancing masters at the French court.

³ Probably a Roman dancer of Montaigne's time.

be, and hazardously. They could not endure his returning sweating and dusty from his exercise, ^cdrinking hot, drinking cold, ^aor see him on a skittish horse, or up against a tough fencer, foil in hand, or with his first harquebus. For there is no help for it: if you want to make a man of him, unquestionably you must not spare him in his youth, and must often clash with the rules of medicine:

^bLet him live beneath the open sky
And dangerously.

HORACE

^cIt is not enough to toughen his soul; we must also toughen his muscles. The soul is too hard pressed unless it is seconded, and has too great a task doing two jobs alone. I know how much mine labors in company with a body so tender and so sensitive, which leans so hard upon it. And I often perceive in my reading that in their writings my masters give weight, as examples of great spirit and stoutheartedness, to acts that are likely to owe more to thickness of skin and toughness of bones. I have seen men, women, and children naturally so constituted that a beating is less to them than a flick of the finger to me; who move neither tongue nor eyebrow at the blows they receive. When athletes imitate philosophers in endurance, their strength is that of sinews rather than of heart.

Now practice at enduring work is practice at enduring pain: *Work hardens one against pain* [Cicero]. The boy must be broken in to the pain and harshness of exercises, to build him up against the pain and harshness of dislocation, colic, cauterization, and the dungeon, and torture. For he may yet be a prey to the last two, which threaten the good as well as the bad in a time like this. We have proof of this right now. Whoever fights the laws threatens even the best of men with the scourge and the noose.

^aAnd besides, the authority of the tutor, which should be sovereign over the pupil, is interrupted and hampered by the presence of the parents. Add the fact that the respect the whole household pays the boy, and the consciousness of the power and greatness of his house, are in my opinion no slight drawbacks at that age.

In this school of dealing with men I have often noticed this flaw, that instead of gaining knowledge of others we strive only to give knowledge of ourselves, and take more pains to peddle our wares than to get new ones. Silence and modesty are very good qualities for social intercourse. This boy will be trained to be sparing and thrifty with his ability when he has acquired it; not to take exception to the stupid things and wild tales that will be told in his presence, for it is uncivil and annoying to hit at everything that is not to our taste. ^cLet him be content with correcting himself, and not seem to reproach others for everything that he refuses to do, or set himself up against common practices. *A man may be wise without ostentation, without arousing envy* [Seneca]. Let him shun these domineering and uncivil airs, and this childish ambition to try to seem more clever by being different and to

gain reputation by finding fault and being original. As it is becoming only to great poets to indulge in poetic license, so it is tolerable only for great and illustrious souls to take unusual liberties. *If Socrates and Aristippus have done something contrary to the rules of behavior and custom, let him not think that he has a right to do the same; for they have gained that privilege by great and divine merits* [Cicero].

^AHe will be taught not to enter into discussion or argument except when he sees a champion worth wrestling with, and even then not to use all the tricks that can help him, but only those that can help him most. Let him be made fastidious in choosing and sorting his arguments, and fond of pertinence, and consequently of brevity. Let him be taught above all to surrender and throw down his arms before truth as soon as he perceives it, whether it be found in the hands of his opponents, or in himself through reconsideration. For he will not be set in a professor's chair to deliver a prepared lecture. He is pledged to no cause, except by the fact that he approves of it. Nor will he take up the trade in which men sell for ready cash the liberty to repent and acknowledge their mistakes. ^C*Nor is he forced by any necessity to defend everything that has been prescribed and commanded* [Cicero].

If his tutor is of my disposition, he will form his will to be a very loyal, very affectionate, and very courageous servant of his prince; but he will cool in him any desire to attach himself to that prince otherwise than by sense of public duty. Besides several other disadvantages which impair our freedom by these private obligations, the judgment of a man who is hired and bought is either less whole and less free, or tainted with imprudence and ingratitude. A courtier can have neither the right nor the will to speak and think otherwise than favorably of a master who among so many thousands of other subjects has chosen him to train and raise up with his own hand. This favor and advantage corrupt his freedom, not without some reason, and dazzle him. Therefore we generally find the language of those people different from any other language in a state, and little to be trusted in such matters.

^ALet his conscience and his virtue shine forth in his speech, ^Cand be guided only by reason. ^ALet him be made to understand that to confess the flaw he discovers in his own argument, though it be still unnoticed except by himself, is an act of judgment and sincerity, which are the principal qualities he seeks; ^Cthat obstinacy and contention are vulgar qualities, most often seen in the meanest souls; that to change his mind and correct himself, to give up a bad position at the height of his ardor, are rare, strong, and philosophical qualities.

^AHe will be warned, when he is in company, to have his eyes everywhere; for I find that the chief places are commonly seized by the least capable men, and that greatness of fortune is rarely found in combination with ability. While people at the upper end of a table were talking about the beauty of a tapestry or the flavor of the malmsey, I have seen many fine sallies wasted at the other end. He will sound the capacity of each man: a cowherd, a mason, a passer-by; he must put everything to use, and borrow from each man according to his wares,

for everything is useful in a household; even the stupidity and weakness of others will be an education to him. By taking stock of the graces and manners of others, he will create in himself desire of the good ones and contempt for the bad.

Put into his head an honest curiosity to inquire into all things; whatever is unusual around him he will see: a building, a fountain, a man, the field of an ancient battle, the place where Caesar or Charlemagne passed:

Which land is parched with heat, which numb with frost,
What wind drives sails to the Italian coast.

PROPERTIUS

He will inquire into the conduct, the resources, and the alliances of this prince and that. These are things very pleasant to learn and very useful to know.

In this association with men I mean to include, and foremost, those who live only in the memory of books. He will associate, by means of histories, with those great souls of the best ages. It is a vain study, if you will; but also, if you will, it is a study of inestimable value, and the only study, as Plato tells us, in which the Lacedaemonians had kept a stake for themselves. What profit will he not gain in this field by reading the *Lives* of our Plutarch? But let my guide remember the object of his task, and let him not impress on his pupil so much the date of the destruction of Carthage as the characters of Hannibal and Scipio, nor so much where Marcellus died as why his death there showed him unworthy of his duty. Let him be taught not so much the histories as how to judge them. That, in my opinion, is of all matters the one to which we apply our minds in the most varying degree. I have read in Livy a hundred things that another man has not read in him. Plutarch has read in him a hundred besides the ones I could read, and perhaps besides what the author had put in. For some it is a purely grammatical study; for others, the skeleton of philosophy, in which the most abstruse parts of our nature are penetrated.

There are in Plutarch many extensive discussions, well worth knowing, for in my judgment he is the master workman in that field; but there are a thousand that he has only just touched on; he merely points out with his finger where we are to go, if we like, and sometimes is content to make only a stab at the heart of a subject. We must snatch these bits out of there and display them properly. Just as that remark of his, that the inhabitants of Asia served one single man because they could not pronounce one single syllable, which is "No," may have given the matter and the impulsion to La Boétie for his *Voluntary Servitude*. Just to see him pick out a trivial action in a man's life, or a word which seems unimportant: that is a treatise in itself. It is a pity that men of understanding are so fond of brevity; doubtless their reputation gains by it, but we lose by it. Plutarch would rather we praised him for his judgment than for his knowledge; he would rather leave us wanting more of him than satiated. He knew that even of good things one may say