

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 8



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On Idleness

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

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

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

^a *uelut aegri somnia, uanae
Finguntur species.*

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

^b *Quisquis ubique habitat, Maxime, nusquam habitat.*

^a When I retired at home recently, I was determined, as much as I could, to stay out of things, and to spend in peace and solitude whatever life I have left to live. I thought I could do my mind no greater favor than to let it be free, to leave it alone, to pause and focus on itself, things I hoped I would be able to do more easily now that I have settled and become more mature. But I find that, on the contrary, *uariam semper dant otia mentem* and that, like a runaway horse, my mind finds a hundred more roads for itself to race down than it would for someone else. It gives birth to so many chimeras and bizarre monsters, one after the other without order or

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

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

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

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

purpose, that, to appreciate how ridiculous and strange they are, I have started to keep a list of them with which, in time, I hope to embarrass it.¹

NOTES

- ¹ Jean Starobinski (2009, 20) notes that this passage is “the first confidence that Montaigne offers concerning the origins of his book.” Krause (2009, 152–3) also shows how much it echoes Seneca’s *De tranquillitate animi*: “I resolve to confine my life within its own walls ... let my mind be fixed upon itself, let it cultivate itself, let it busy itself with nothing outside, let it love the tranquility, that is remote from private and public concern. ... [The mind] must forsake the common track and be driven to frenzy and champ the bit and run away with its rider and rush to a height it would have feared to climb itself.”

MONTAIGNE’S SOURCES

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