

25 *Of pedantry*

^AI was often annoyed in my childhood to see a teacher always the butt in Italian comedies; and the title of Magister used to have scarcely a more honorable significance among us Frenchmen. For since I had been given into their tutelage and charge, was it not the least I could do to be jealous of their reputation? I sought indeed to excuse them on account of the natural incompatibility that exists between the common herd and people of rare and excellent judgment and knowledge, inasmuch as these two groups go entirely different ways. But I was wasting my Latin, since the finest gentlemen were those who held teachers most in contempt, witness our good Du Bellay:

But I hate above all pedantic learning.

^BAnd this custom is an ancient one; for Plutarch says that *Greek* and *student* were terms of reproach and contempt among the Romans.

^ASince then, as I grew older, I found that they had a very good reason for this, and that *the greatest scholars are not the wisest men* [proverb quoted by Rabelais]. But how it is possible that a soul rich in the knowledge of so many things should not thereby become keener and more alert, and that a crude and commonplace mind can harbor within itself, without being improved, the reasonings and judgments of the greatest minds that the world has produced—that still has me puzzled.

^B“To take in so many other brains, and such great and powerful ones,” a young lady,¹ the first of our princesses, said to me, speaking of a certain person, “our own must crowd itself down, confine itself, and make itself small, to make room for the others.”

^AI should be inclined to say that as plants are stifled with too much moisture, and lamps with too much oil, so too much study and matter stifles the action of the mind, which, being caught and entangled in a great variety of things, may lose the ability to break loose, and be kept bent and huddled down by its burden.

But it works the other way, for the more our soul is filled, the larger it becomes. And in the examples from olden times, we see as further proof to the contrary that able men in the handling of public matters, great captains, and great counselors in affairs of state, have at the same time been very learned.

And as for the philosophers, who are remote from all public occupation, they have also in truth sometimes been mocked by the comic license of their times, ^Ctheir opinions and ways making them ridiculous.

Do you want to make them judge the merits of a case, the actions of a man? They are well prepared indeed. They are still trying to find out whether there is life, whether there is movement, whether man is something other than an ox, what it is to act and to be acted on, what kind of animals laws and justice are. Do they speak of the magistrate, or speak to him? They do so with an irreverent and uncivil liberty. Do they hear their prince or a king praised? He is just a shepherd to them, idle as a shepherd, occupied in milking and fleecing his flocks, but much more roughly than a shepherd. Do you consider someone greater for owning two thousand acres of land? They mock him, being accustomed to embrace the whole world as their possession. Do you boast of your nobility because you can count seven rich ancestors? They think little of you, as one not conceiving the universal image of nature or how many predecessors each of us has had: rich, poor, kings, servants, Greeks, and barbarians. And though you were the fiftieth in descent from Hercules, they find you vain to make capital of this gift of fortune.

Thus the common herd disdained them as ignorant of the elementary and common things, as presumptuous and insolent. But this Platonic picture is far removed from the one we need for our folk. ^AThose men

¹ Probably Catherine de Bourbon, sister of Henry of Navarre; but quite possibly Henry's wife, Margaret of Valois, sister of Henry III.

were envied as being above the common fashion, as disdaining public actions, as having set up a particular and inimitable way of life regulated by certain lofty and extraordinary principles; these are despised as being beneath the common fashion, as incapable of public responsibilities, as dragging along behind the common herd their base life and ways.

^CI hate men base in deeds but wise in words.

PACUVIUS

^AAs for those philosophers, I say, as they were great in knowledge, so they were greater still in every kind of action. And just as they tell of that geometrician of Syracuse² that having been diverted from his contemplation to put some of it into practice for the defense of his country, he immediately put into operation frightful machines and effects surpassing all human belief, though all the while himself disdaining all this handiwork and thinking that he had thereby besmirched the dignity of his art, of which his inventions were but the apprentice work and playthings; so they, if at any time they were put to the test of action, were seen to soar on such a lofty wing that it clearly appeared that their heart and soul had been marvelously enlarged and enriched by the understanding of things.

But ^Csome of them, seeing the citadel of political government seized by incapable men, have withdrawn from it. And the man who asked Crates how long it was necessary to philosophize received this answer: “Until it is no longer donkey drivers who lead our armies.” Heraclitus resigned the kingdom to his brother, and said to the Ephesians who were reproaching him for spending his time playing with children in front of the temple: “Isn't it better to be doing this than to be governing the affairs of state in your company?” ^AOthers, whose imagination was set above fortune and the world, found the seats of justice, and even the thrones of kings, low and vile. ^CAnd Empedocles refused the throne that the Agrigentines offered him. ^AAfter Thales had several times criticized people's concern with managing a household and getting rich, they reproached him, saying that he was doing so like the fox, because he could not attain these things. He decided, for fun, to test this out; and making his learning stoop for this once to the service of profit and gain, he set up a traffic which within a year brought in such riches that hardly in their whole lifetime could the most experienced in that trade make as much.

^CWhat Aristotle relates of some who called both Thales and Anaxagoras and the likes of them wise but not prudent, because they cared not enough for the more useful things—aside from the fact that I do not very well digest this distinction in terms—does not serve to excuse the people I have in mind; rather, seeing the base and necessitous fortune with which they are content, we would be justified in saying both things, that they are both not wise and not prudent.

^AI leave this first explanation, and think it better to say that this evil

² Archimedes.

comes from the bad way that men of learning have of going at the sciences; and that the way we are instructed, it is no wonder if neither the students nor the masters grow in ability, although they do make themselves more learned. In truth, the care and expense of our fathers aims only at furnishing our heads with knowledge; of judgment and virtue, little news. ^cExclaim to our people about a passer-by "Oh, what a learned man!" and about another "Oh, what a good man!" They will not fail to turn their eyes and their respect toward the first. There should be a third exclamation: "Oh, what blockheads!" ^AWe are eager to inquire: "Does he know Greek or Latin? Does he write in verse or in prose?" But whether he has become better or wiser, which would be the main thing, that is left out. We should have asked who is better learned, not who is more learned.

We labor only to fill our memory, and leave the understanding ^cand the conscience ^Aempty. Just as birds sometimes go in quest of grain, and carry it in their beak without tasting it to give a beakful to their little ones, so our pedants go pillaging knowledge in books and lodge it only on the end of their lips, in order merely to disgorge it and scatter it to the winds.

^cIt is wonderful how appropriately this folly fits my case. Isn't it doing the same thing, what I do in most of this composition? I go about cadging from books here and there the sayings that please me, not to keep them, for I have no storehouses, but to transport them into this one, in which, to tell the truth, they are no more mine than in their original place. We are, I believe, learned only with present knowledge, not with past, any more than with future.

^ABut what is worse, their students and their little ones are not nourished and fed with their learning either; it passes from hand to hand for the sole purpose of making a show of it, talking to others and telling stories about it; like chits that have no other value and use than to be counted and thrown away. ^c*They have learned to speak among others, not with themselves* [Cicero]. *Not talking, but steering, is needed* [Seneca].

Nature, to show that there is nothing barbarous in what is under her guidance, often brings forth, in the nations least cultivated by art, productions of the mind that vie with the most artistic productions. How nice for my purpose is the Gascon proverb, *We may blow and blow, but we still have to move our fingers*, taken from a shepherd's song.

^AWe know how to say: "Cicero says thus; such are the morals of Plato; these are the very words of Aristotle." But what do we say ourselves? What do we judge? What do we do? A parrot could well say as much.

This habit makes me think of that rich Roman who went to much trouble and very great expense to procure men learned in every field of knowledge, whom he kept continually around him, so that when there should befall among his friends some occasion to speak of one thing or another, they should fill his place and all be ready to furnish him, one with an argument, one with a verse of Homer, each one according

to his quarry; and he thought that this knowledge was his own because it was in the heads of his men, as those also do whose ability dwells in their sumptuous libraries.

^cI know a man who, when I ask him what he knows, asks me for a book in order to point it out to me, and wouldn't dare tell me that he has an itchy backside unless he goes immediately and studies in his lexicon what is itchy and what is a backside.

^AWe take the opinions and the knowledge of others into our keeping, and that is all. We must make them our own. We are just like a man who, needing fire, should go and fetch some at his neighbor's house, and, having found a fine big fire there, should stop there and warm himself, forgetting to carry any back home. What good does it do us to have our belly full of meat if it is not digested, if it is not transformed into us, if it does not make us bigger and stronger? Do we think that Lucullus, whom books, without experience, made and fashioned into such a great captain, used them in our manner?

^BWe let ourselves lean so heavily on the arms of others that we annihilate our own powers. Do I want to arm myself against the fear of death? I do so at Seneca's expense. Do I want to draw consolation for myself or for another? I borrow it from Cicero. I would have got it in myself if I had been trained to. I don't like this dependent and mendicant ability.

^AEven if we could be learned with other men's learning, at least wise we cannot be except by our own wisdom.

I hate the wise man who is not wise for himself.

EURIPIDES

^c*Whence Ennius: The wise man is wise to no purpose who can do himself no good* [quoted by Cicero].

^BIf greedy, vain, and viler than a Euganean lamb.

JUVENAL

^c*For we must not only acquire wisdom, but profit by it* [Cicero].

Dionysius used to make fun of the grammarians who are at pains to inquire about the troubles of Ulysses and are ignorant of their own; the musicians who attune their flutes and do not attune their morals; the orators who study to talk justice, not to do it.

^AIf our soul does not go at a better gait, if we do not have sounder judgment for all our learning, I had just as lief my student had spent his time playing tennis: at least his body would be the blither. See him come back from there, after fifteen or sixteen years put in: there is nothing so unfit for use. All the advantage you recognize is that his Latin and Greek have made him more conceited and arrogant than when he left home. ^cHe should have brought back his soul full; he brings it back only swollen; he has only inflated it instead of enlarging it.

These schoolmasters, as Plato says of their cousins the Sophists, are of all men those who promise to be the most useful to men, and who, alone of all men, not only do not improve what is committed to them,

as does a carpenter or a mason, but make it worse, and take pay for having made it worse.

If the rule that Protagoras proposed to his pupils were followed—that they should either pay him on his terms, or swear in the temple how much they valued the profit that they had received from his teachings and compensate his pains accordingly—my pedagogues would find themselves disappointed, if they trusted the sworn testimony of my experience.

^AMy Perigordian patois very comically calls these little men of learning *Lettre-ferits*, as if to say *lettre-ferus*³ (letter-struck), men whom letters have dealt a hammer blow, as they say. In truth, most of the time they seem to have sunk even beneath common sense. For you see the peasant and the shoemaker go their way simply and naturally talking about what they know; while these men, through wanting to exalt themselves and swagger around with this learning that is floating on the surface of their brain, are perpetually getting confused and tangled up in their own feet. Fine words escape them, but let another man apply them. They know Galen well, but the patient not at all. They have already filled your head with laws, and still have not yet grasped the crux of the case. They know the theory of all things; *you* find someone who will put it in practice.

I have seen a friend of mine, in my house, when he had to deal with one of these people, invent for fun a jargon of windy nonsense, remarks without sequence, a tissue of borrowed fragments, except that it was often interlarded with words appropriate to their dispute, and thus keep this fool busy all day debating and always thinking he was answering the objections that were made against him; and yet this was a man of letters and reputation, ^Band wore a fine gown.

Oh you, patrician race, whose skulls are blind,
Watch for the grimaces that lurk behind.

PERSIUS

^AWhoever will closely observe this sort of people, who are very widespread, will find, as I have, that most of the time they understand neither themselves nor others, and that they have a full enough memory but an entirely hollow judgment, unless their nature has of itself fashioned it otherwise: as I have seen in Adrianus Turnebus, who, having had no other profession but letters, in which, in my opinion, he was the greatest man that has been in a thousand years, had nevertheless nothing pedantic about him but the gown he wore and a certain external mannerism that might not be civilized by a courtier's standard, which are things of no importance. ^BAnd I hate our people who find it harder to tolerate a gown awry than a soul awry, and judge a man by his bow, his bearing, and his boots. ^AFor inside he was the most polished soul in the world. I have often deliberately launched him on topics remote from his practice; he saw into them so clearly, with so quick an appre-

³ *Ferit* and *feru* both are past participles of the verb *ferir*, to strike.

hension, so sound a judgment, that it seemed as if he had never practiced any other profession than war and affairs of state. Those are fine strong natures—

^BFor whom, with art benign,
Prometheus shaped a heart of clay more fine

JUVENAL

—^Awhich hold fast through a bad education. Now it is not enough for our education not to spoil us; it must change us for the better.

There are some of our Parlements which, when they have to admit members, examine them only on their learning; the others add also a test of their sense, by presenting them with a case for judgment. These seem to me to have a much better method; and even though both parts are necessary, and both must be present, still in truth it is a fact that learning is less valuable than judgment. The latter can do without the former, and not the former without the latter. For as that Greek verse says—

Knowledge is nothing if the mind's not there

STOBAEUS

—what is the use of learning, if understanding is absent? Would God that, for the good of our justice, those bodies were as well furnished with understanding and conscience as they are with learning! ^C*We learn not for life but for the schoolroom* [Seneca]. ^ANow we must not attach learning to the mind, we must incorporate it; we must not sprinkle, but dye. And if learning does not change the mind and improve its imperfect state, certainly we do much better to let it alone. Learning is a dangerous sword that will hamper and hurt its master, if it is in a weak hand that does not know how to use it—^C*so that it were better not to have learned* [Cicero].

^APerhaps this is the reason why neither we nor theology require much learning of women; and why Francis, duke of Brittany, son of John V, when they were talking to him about his marriage with Isabel, a princess of Scotland, and told him that she had been brought up simply and without any instruction in letters, replied that he loved her the better for it, and that a woman was learned enough when she knew how to distinguish between her husband's shirt and his doublet.

And so it is not so great a wonder as they claim that our ancestors took no great account of letters, and that even today they come in only by chance in the principal councils of our kings; and if the aim of getting rich by them, which alone is set before us today, by means of jurisprudence, medicine, teaching, and even theology, did not maintain them in credit, you would undoubtedly see them in as wretched condition as they ever were. And what loss would that be, if they teach us neither to think well nor to do well? ^C*Now that the learned have appeared, good men are wanting* [Seneca]. Any other knowledge is harmful to a man who has not the knowledge of goodness.

But perhaps the reason that I was just looking for comes also from

this, that our studies in France have almost no other aim but profit, except for those whom nature brought into the world for offices more noble than lucrative and who devote themselves to letters for such a short time, withdrawing, before they have acquired a taste for them, to a profession that has nothing in common with books; hence there ordinarily remain none to involve themselves completely in study but people of humble means, who seek a living in it. And the souls of those people, being both by nature and by home upbringing and example of the basest alloy, bring forth false fruits of learning. For learning is not there to give light to the soul that has none, or to make a blind man see. Her business is not to furnish him with sight but to direct the sight he has, to regulate its steps, provided it has straight and capable feet and legs of its own.

Knowledge is a good drug; but no drug is strong enough to preserve itself without alteration and corruption, according to the taint of the vessel that contains it. A given man sees clear but not straight, and consequently sees the good and does not follow it, and sees knowledge and does not use it. The principal ordinance of Plato in his *Republic* is to give his citizens their jobs according to their nature. Nature can do all and does all. Cripples are ill-suited to bodily exercises, and crippled souls to mental exercises; bastard and vulgar souls are unworthy of philosophy. When we see a man ill-shod, we say it is no wonder, if he is a shoemaker. Likewise it seems that experience often shows us a doctor worse doctored, a theologian less reformed, a scholar less competent, than anyone else.

Aristo of Chios had reason to say long ago that philosophers harmed their listeners, inasmuch as most souls are not fit to profit by such instruction, which, if it does not work for good, works for evil: *debauchees came out of the school of Aristippus, boors from that of Zeno* [Cicero].

^AIn that fine education that Xenophon attributes to the Persians, we find that they taught their children virtue as other nations do letters. ^CPlato says that the eldest son in their royal succession was brought up as follows: After his birth he was given over not to women but to eunuchs of the highest authority with their kings because of their virtue. These took charge of making his body fair and healthy, and after seven years trained him to ride a horse and to go hunting. When he had reached fourteen, they put him in the hands of four men: the wisest, the most just, the most temperate, and the most valiant in the nation. The first taught him religion; the second, to be always truthful; the third, to make himself master of his appetites; the fourth, to fear nothing.

^AIt is a thing worthy of very great consideration in that excellent form of government of Lycurgus, one in truth prodigious in its perfection, that despite the emphasis on the education of children as the state's principal responsibility, and that in the very seat of the Muses, there is so little mention made of learning; as if those high-souled youths, disdaining any other yoke than that of virtue, had to be furnished merely with masters of valor, wisdom, and justice, instead of with our masters of knowledge: ^Can example that Plato followed in his *Laws*. ^AThe

method of their teaching was to ask them questions on their judgment of men and their actions; and if they condemned or praised this person or that deed, they had to reason out what they said; and by this means they both sharpened their understanding and at the same time learned what was right.

Astyages, in Xenophon, asks Cyrus for an account of his last lesson. "It was this," he says. "In our school a big boy who had a small coat gave it to one of his schoolmates who was smaller and took away his coat, which was larger. Our teacher having made me judge of this dispute, I judged that things should be left in that state, and that both seemed to be better suited in this way; whereupon he pointed out to me that I had done badly, for I had stopped at considering fitness, whereas I should first of all have taken care of justice, which willed that no one should be forced in regard to what belonged to him." And he says that he was whipped for it, just as we are in our villages for having forgotten the first aorist of *τύπτω*.

My schoolmaster would make me a fine harangue *in genere demonstrativo* before he would persuade me that his school is worth that one. They wanted to take a short cut; and since it is a fact that learning, even when it is taken most directly, can only teach us *about* wisdom, integrity, and resolution, they wanted to put their children from the first in contact with deeds, and instruct them, not by hearsay, but by the test of action, forming and molding them in a living way, not only by precepts and words, but principally by examples and works; so that learning might be not merely a knowledge in their soul, but its character and habit; not an acquisition but a natural possession. In this connection, someone asked Agesilaus what he thought children should learn. "What they should do when they are men," he replied. It is no wonder if such an education has produced such admirable results.

They used to go, it is said, to the other cities of Greece to look for rhetoricians, painters, and musicians; but to Lacedaemon for legislators, magistrates, and army generals. At Athens they learned to speak well, here to do well; there to disentangle themselves from a sophistical argument and to overthrow the imposture of words captiously interlaced, here to disentangle themselves from the lures of sensual pleasure, and with great courage to overthrow the threats of fortune and death; those men busied themselves with words, these with things; there it was a continual exercise of the tongue, here a continual exercise of the soul. Wherefore it is not strange if, when Antipater demanded of them fifty children for hostages, they answered, quite contrary to what we should do, that they would rather give up twice as many grown men, so important did they consider the loss of their country's education. When Agesilaus invites Xenophon to send his children to be brought up in Sparta, it is not to learn rhetoric or dialectic there, but to learn, as he says, the finest science there is, namely, the science of obeying and commanding.

^CIt is very amusing to see Socrates, after his manner, making fun of Hippias—who tells him how he earned a good sum of money teaching

school, especially in certain little towns in Sicily, and that at Sparta he didn't earn a cent—by saying that they are idiots, who don't know how to measure or count and who set no store by either grammar or rhythm, busying themselves merely with knowing the succession of kings, the founding and decadence of states, and such a jumble of tales. And at the end of all this, Socrates, making Hippias admit step by step the excellence of their form of public government, the happiness and virtue of their life, leaves it to him to guess the conclusion: that his own arts are useless.

Examples teach us, both in that martial government and in all others like it, that the pursuit of knowledge makes men's hearts soft and effeminate more than it makes them strong and warlike. The strongest state that we see in the world at present is that of the Turks, a people equally trained to esteem arms and despise letters. I consider Rome more valiant before she was learned. The most warlike nations in our day are the most crude and ignorant. The Scythians, the Parthians, Tamerlane, serve as a proof of this. When the Goths ravaged Greece, what saved all the libraries from being set afire was that one of the invaders spread the opinion that this item might well be left intact to the enemy, to divert them from military exercises and keep them busy in sedentary and idle occupations. When our King Charles VIII, without drawing his sword from its scabbard, saw himself master of the kingdom of Naples and a good part of Tuscany, the noblemen in his suite attributed the unhoped-for ease of this conquest to the fact that the princes and nobles of Italy were more involved in making themselves ingenious and learned than vigorous and warlike.