

25. On schoolmasters' learning

[This chapter – Du Pédantisme in French – is not limited to what we mean by pedantry today. Its main butt was originally dominees and dons who may impress the young but are parrots unfitted for real life; they know things off by rote but are not wise; they resemble the sophists mocked in Antiquity rather than true philosophers who, even then, were laughed at (but for reasons which did them honour). The later editions, especially [C], emphasize that true philosophers are an elite who know the limits of their knowledge.]

Montaigne, writing consciously as a gentleman, partly has in mind Baldassari Castiglione's Book of the Courtier, which was written in Italian for Francis I of France as a means of making his court more elegant.

The unnamed German who taught Montaigne to speak Latin as his first language was Albert Horstanus, some of whose letters have been preserved (cf. Hartmann, Amerbach-korrespondenz, IX – 2, p. 504).]

[A] when I was a schoolboy I was often upset when I saw schoolmasters treated as buffoons in Italian comedies – (and among us French the title of *Magister* can scarcely be said to imply much more respect).¹ Placed as I was under their control and tutelage, the least I could do was to be jealous of their reputation. I tried to make excuses for them in terms of the natural conflict between the common man and men of rare judgement and outstanding learning – an inevitable one since their courses run flat opposite to each other. But the effort was wasted: it was the most civilized of men who held them in the greatest contempt; witness our excellent Du Bellay:

Mais je hay par sur tout un sçavoir pédantesque.

[But most of all I loathe schoolmasterish erudition.]²

[B] This attitude goes back to the Ancients: for Plutarch says that

scholar and *Greek* were terms of abuse among the Romans; they were insults.³

[A] As I grew older I found that they were absolutely right and that '*magis magnos clericos non sunt magis magnos sapientes*' ['them most biggest clerks ain't the most wisest'].⁴ Yet how it can happen that a soul enriched by so much knowledge should not be more alert and alive, or that a grosser, commonplace spirit can without moral improvement lodge within itself the reasonings and judgements of the most excellent minds which the world has ever produced: that still leaves me wondering.

[B] A young woman, the foremost of our Princesses,⁵ said to me of a particular man that, by welcoming in as he did the brains of others, so powerful and so numerous, his own brain was forced to squeeze up close, crouch down and contract in order to make room for them all!

[A] I would like to suggest that our minds are swamped by too much study [C] and by too much matter [A] just as plants are swamped by too much water [C] or lamps by too much oil; [A] that our minds, held fast and encumbered by so many diverse preoccupations, may well lose the means of struggling free, remaining bowed and bent under the load; except that it is quite otherwise: the more our souls are filled, the more they expand; examples drawn from far-off times show, on the contrary, that great soldiers and statesmen were also [C] great [A] scholars.⁶

Those philosophers who did withdraw from all affairs of state were indeed mocked by the comic licence of their times⁷ [C] since their opinions and manners made them look ridiculous: can you expect men

like that to judge of rights in a law-suit or to judge a man's deeds? How fit they are to do that, I must say! They are still trying to find out whether there is such a thing as life or motion; whether Man differs from Ox; what is meant by active and passive; what sort of creatures law and justice are! When they talk of or to a man in authority they show an uncouth and disrespectful licence. Do they hear a king or their own ruler praised? To them he is but an idle shepherd who spends his time exploiting his sheep's wool and milk, only more harshly than a real shepherd does. Do you think a man may be more important because he possesses as his own a couple of thousand acres? They laugh at that, used as they are to treating the whole world as their own. Do you pride yourself on your nobility, since you reckon to have seven rich forebears? They do not think much of you: you have no conception of the universality of Nature – nor of the great many forebears each of us has – rich ones, poor ones, kings, lackeys, Greeks, Barbarians... Even if you were fiftieth in line from Hercules they would think you frivolous to value such a chance endowment. And so the common man despised *them*, as men who knew nothing about basic everyday matters or as men ignorant and presumptuous.

But that portrait drawn from Plato is far removed from what is lacking in the kind of people we are talking about. [A] The others were envied for being above the common concerns, as being contemptuous of public duties, and as men who had constructed a way of life which was private, inimitable, governed by definite, high and unusual principles; the men we are talking about are despised as inferior to the common model, as incapable of public duties, as men dragging their lives and their base vile morals way behind the common sort of men.

[C] *Odi homines ignava opera, philosopha sententia.*

[I hate men whose words are philosophical but whose deeds are base.]⁸

[A] Those other philosophers, I say, were great in learning, greater still in activities of every kind. As in the tale of that geometrician of Syracuse⁹ who was interrupted in his contemplations in order to put some of them to practical use in the defence of his country: he set about at once producing frightful inventions, surpassing human belief; yet he himself despised the work of his hands, thinking that he had compromised the dignity of his art, of which his inventions were but apprentice-toys: so too with them; when they were at times put to the test of action they were seen to fly aloft on so soaring a wing that that it was clear that their understanding had indeed wondrously enriched their hearts and minds. But [C] some, observing that the fortress of political power had been taken over by incompetents, withdrew: the man who asked Crates how long one had to go on philosophizing, was told, 'Until our armies are no longer led by mule-drivers.' Heraclitus made over his kingdom to his brother; and to the citizens of Ephesus who reproached him for spending his time playing with the children in front of the temple he retorted: 'Is doing that not more worthwhile than sharing the control of affairs with the likes of you?'¹⁰ [A] Others, who had their thoughts set above the fortunes of this world, found the seats of Justice and the very thrones of kings to be base and vile: [C] Empedocles rejected the offer of kingship made by the men of Agrigentum. [A] When Thales condemned preoccupations with thrift and money-making he was accused of sour grapes like the fox. It pleased him, for fun, to make a revealing experiment; for this purpose he debased his knowledge in the service of profit and gain, setting up a

business which in one year brought in as much wealth as the most experienced in the trade were hard put to match in a lifetime.¹¹

[C] Aristotle tells of some people who called Thales, Anaxagoras and their like wise but not prudent, in that they did not concern themselves enough with the more useful matters;¹² I cannot easily swallow that verbal distinction, but apart from that it provides no excuse for the people I am talking about: judging from the base and needy lot they are satisfied with, they are both not wise and not prudent.

[A] But leaving aside this first explanation, I think it is better to say that the evil arises from their tackling the sciences in the wrong manner and that, from the way we have been taught, it is no wonder that neither master nor pupils become more able, even though they do know more. In truth the care and fees of our parents aim only at furnishing our heads with knowledge: nobody talks about judgement or virtue. When someone passes by, try exclaiming, 'Oh, what a *learned* man!' Then, when another does, 'Oh, what a *good* man!' Our people will not fail to turn their gaze respectfully towards the first. There ought to be a third man crying, 'Oh, what blockheads!'¹³

We readily inquire, 'Does he know Greek or Latin?' 'Can he write poetry and prose?' But what matters most is what we put last: 'Has he become better and wiser?' We ought to find out not who understands most but who understands best. We work merely to fill the memory, leaving the understanding [C] and the sense of right and wrong [A] empty. Just as birds sometimes go in search of grain, carrying it in their beaks without tasting it to stuff it down the beaks of their young,

so too do our schoolmasters go foraging for learning in their books and merely lodge it on the tip of their lips, only to spew it out and scatter it on the wind.

[C] Such foolishness fits my own case marvellously well. Am I for the most part not doing the same when assembling my material? Off I go, rummaging about in books for sayings which please me – not so as to store them up (for I have no storehouses) but so as to carry them back to this book, where they are no more mine than they were in their original place. We only know, I believe, what we know now: ‘knowing’ no more consists in what we once knew than in what we shall know in the future.

[A] But what is worse, their pupils and their little charges are not nourished and fed by what they learn: the learning is passed from hand to hand with only one end in view: to show it off, to put into our accounts to entertain others with it, as though it were merely counters, useful for totting up and producing statements, but having no other use or currency. [C] *‘Apud alios loqui didicerunt, non ipsi secum’* [They have learned how to talk with others, not with themselves]: *‘Non est loquendum, sed gubemandum.’* [We do not need talk but helmsmanship.]¹⁴

Nature, to show that nothing beneath her sway is really savage, has brought forth among peoples whom art has least civilized things which rival the best that art can produce. There is a Gascon proverb, drawn from a country flute-song, which has just the right nuance for my purpose: *‘Bouha prou bouha, mas a remuda lous ditz qu’em.’* [‘Puff and blow as you will: what concerns us is the movement of the fingers.’]

[A] We know how to say, ‘This is what Cicero said’; ‘This is morality for Plato’; ‘These are the *ipsissima verba* of Aristotle.’ But what have we got to say? What judgements do we make? What are we doing? A parrot could talk as well as we do.¹⁵

Such behaviour puts me in mind of a rich Roman who had, at great expense, taken care to obtain the services of experts in all branches of learning;¹⁶ he kept them always about him so that, when some topic or other should happen to come up when he was with friends, each would bring supplies to his market, ready to furnish him with a brace of arguments or a verse bagged from Homer, depending on what kind of game they traded in. He thought that that knowledge was his because it was in the heads of people who were in his pay – as is the case of those men whose learned abundance consists in owning sumptuous libraries.

[C] Whenever I ask a certain acquaintance of mine to tell me what he knows about anything, he wants to show me a book: he would not venture to tell me that he has scabs on his arse without studying his lexicon to find out the meanings of *scab* and of *arse*.

[A] All we do is to look after the opinions and learning of others: we ought to make them our own. We closely resemble a man who, needing a fire, goes next door to get a light, finds a great big blaze there and stays to warm himself, forgetting to take a brand back home.¹⁷ What use is it to us to have a belly full of meat if we do not digest it, if we do not transmute it into ourselves, if it does not make us grow in size and strength? Do we imagine that Lucullus, whom reading, not experience, made [C] and fashioned [A] into so great a captain, treated reading as we do?¹⁸ [B] We allow ourselves to lean so heavily

on other men's arms that we destroy our own force. Do I wish to fortify myself against fear of death? Then I do it at Seneca's expense. Do I want to console myself or somebody else? Then I borrow from Cicero: I would have drawn it from my own resources if only I had been made to practise doing so. I have no love for such competence as is borne off and begged.

[A] Learned we may be with another man's learning: we can only be wise with wisdom of our own:

Μίσῶ σοφιστήν, ὅστις οὐχ αὐτῷ σόφος

[I hate a sage who is not wise for himself.]¹⁹

[C] *'Ex quo Ennius: Nequicquam sapere sapientem, qui ipse sibi prodesse non quiret'* [Hence what Ennius said: 'That Sage is in no way wise who seeks not self-improvement']...

[B] ... *Si cupidus, si*

Vanus et Euganea quantumvis vilior agna

[If he is avaricious and vain, or scraggier than a ewe in Euganea];

[C] *'Non enim paranda nobis solum, sed fruenda sapientia est.'* ['We must not only obtain Wisdom: we must enjoy her.']²⁰ Dionysius used to laugh at professors of grammar who did research into the bad qualities of Ulysses yet knew nothing of their own; at musicians whose flutes were harmonious but not their morals; at orators whose studies led to talking about justice, not to being just.²¹

[A] If our souls do not move with a better motion and if we do not have a healthier judgement, then I would just as soon that our pupil should spend his time playing tennis: at least his body would become

more agile. But just look at him after he has spent some fifteen or sixteen years studying: nothing could be more unsuited for employment. The only improvement you can see is that his Latin and Greek have made him more conceited and more arrogant than when he left home. [C] He ought to have brought back a fuller soul: he brings back a swollen one; instead of making it weightier he has merely blown wind into it.

These *Magisters* (as Plato says of their cousins, the Sophists) are unique in promising to be the most useful of men while being the only ones who not only fail to improve what is entrusted to them (yet carpenters or masons do so) but actually make it worse. And then they charge you for it.²²

Were we to accept the terms put forward by Protagoras²³ – that either he should be paid his set fee or else his pupils should declare on oath in the temple what profit they reckoned they had gained from what he had taught them and remunerate him accordingly – these pedagogues of mine would be in for a disappointment if they had to rely on oaths based upon my experience.

[A] In my local Périgord dialect these stripling *savants* are amusingly called *Lettreferits* ('word-struck'), as though their reading has given them, so to speak, a whack with a hammer. In truth, as often as not they appear to have been knocked below common-sense itself. Take a peasant or a cobbler: you can see them going simply and innocently about their business, talking only of what they know: whereas these fellows, who want to rise up [C] and fight [A] armed with knowledge which is merely floating about on the surface of their

brains, are for ever getting snarled up and entangled. Fine words break loose from them: but let somebody else apply them! They know their Galen but not their patient. They stuff your head full of prescriptions before they even understand what the case is about. They have learned the theory of everything: try and find one who can put it into practice.

In my own house a friend of mine had to deal with one of these fellows; he amused himself by coining some nonsensical jargon composed of disconnected phrases and borrowed passages, but often interlarded with terms bearing on their discussion: he kept the fool arguing for one whole day, thinking all the time that he was answering objections put before him. Yet he had a reputation for learning – [B] and a fine gown, too.

*Vos, o patritius sanguis, quos vivere par est
Occipiti, cæco, posticæ occurrere sannæ.*

[O ye men of patrician blood! You have no eyes in the back of your heads: beware of the faces which are pulled behind your backs.]²⁴

[A] Whoever will look closely at persons of this sort – and they are spread about everywhere – will find as I do that for the most part they understand neither themselves nor anyone else and that while their memory is very full their judgement remains entirely hollow – unless their own nature has fashioned it for them otherwise, as I saw in the case of Adrian Turnebus who had no other profession but letters (in which he was, in my opinion, the greatest man for a millennium) yet who had nothing donnish about him except the way he wore his gown and some superficial mannerisms which might not be elegant *al Cortegiano* but which really amount to nothing.²⁵ [B] And I loathe

people who find it harder to put up with a gown askew than with a soul askew and who judge a man by his bow, his bearing and his boots. [A] For, within, Turnebus was the most polished of men. I often intentionally tossed him into subjects remote from his experience: his insight was so lucid, his grasp so quick and his judgement so sound that it would seem that he had never had any other business but war or statecraft.

Natures like that are fair and strong:

[B] *queis arte benigna*
Et meliore luto finxit præcordia Titan;

[Whose minds are made by Titan with gracious art and from a better clay;]²⁶

[A] they keep their integrity even through a bad education. Yet it is not enough that our education should not deprave us: it must change us for the better.

When our Courts of Parliament have to admit magistrates, some examine only their learning: others also make a practical assay of their ability by giving them a case to judge. The latter seem to me to have the better procedure, and even though both those are necessary and both needed together, nevertheless the talent for knowledge is less to be prized than that for judging. Judgement can do without knowledge: but not knowledge without judgement. It is what that Greek verse says:

Ὡς οὐδέν ἢ μάθησις, ἢν μὴ νοῦς παρῆ

– ‘what use is knowledge if there is no understanding?’²⁷ Would to God for the good of French justice that those Societies should prove to be as well furnished with understanding and integrity as they still are with

knowledge! [C] *'Non vitae sed scholae discimus.'* [We are taught for the schoolroom not for life.]²⁸

[A] Now we are not merely to stick knowledge on to the soul: we must incorporate it into her; the soul should not be sprinkled with knowledge but steeped in it.²⁹ And if knowledge does not change her and make her imperfect state better then it is preferable just to leave it alone. Knowledge is a dangerous sword; in a weak hand which does not know how to wield it it gets in its master's way and wounds him, [C] *'ut fuerit melius non didicisse'* [so that it would have been better not to have studied at all].³⁰

[A] Perhaps that is why we French do not require much learning in our wives (nor does Theology) and why, when Francis Duke of Brittany, the son of John V, was exploring the possibility of a marriage to Isabella, a princess of Scotland, and was told that she had been brought up simply and never taught to read, he replied that he liked her all the better for it and that a wife is learned enough when she can tell the difference between her husband's undershirt and his doublet.³¹ And it is not as great a wonder as they proclaim it to be that our forebears thought little of book-learning and that even now it is only found by chance in the chief councils of our monarchs; for without the unique goal which is actually set before us (that is, to get rich by means of jurisprudence, medicine, paedagogy, and Theology too, a goal which does keep such disciplines respected) you would see them still as wretched as they ever were. If they teach us neither to think well nor to act well, what have we lost? [C] *'Postquam docti prodierunt, boni desunt.'* [Now that so many are learned, it is good men that we lack.]³² All

other knowledge is harmful in a man who has no knowledge of what is good.

But the reason that I was looking for just now, could it not also arise from the fact that since studies in France have virtually no other end than the making of money, few of those whom nature has begotten for duties noble rather than lucrative devote themselves to learning; or else they do so quite briefly, withdrawing (before having acquired a taste for learning) to a profession which has nothing in common with books; normally there are few left to devote themselves entirely to study except people with no money, who do strive to make their living from it. And the souls of people like that – souls of the basest alloy by nature, by their home upbringing and by example – bear but the false fruits of knowledge. For learning sheds no light on a soul which lacks it; it cannot make a blind man see: her task is not to furnish him with sight but to train his own and to put it through its paces – if, that is, it has legs and hoofs which are sound and capable.

Learning is a good medicine: but no medicine is powerful enough to preserve itself from taint and corruption independently of defects in the jar that it is kept in. One man sees clearly but does not see straight: consequently he sees what is good but fails to follow it; he sees knowledge and does not use it. The main statute of Plato in his *Republic* is to allocate duties to his citizens according to their natures.³³ Nature can do all, does do all: the lame are not suited to physical exercises, nor are lame souls suited to spiritual ones: misbegotten and vulgar souls are unworthy of philosophy. When we see a man ill-shod, we are not surprised when he turns out to be a cobbler! In the same way it would

seem that experience often shows us that doctors are the worst doctored, theologians the most unreformed and the learned the least able.

In Ancient times Ariston of Chios was right to say that philosophers do harm to their hearers, since most souls are incapable of profiting from such teaching, which when it cannot do good turns to bad: *'asotos ex Aristippi: acerbos ex Zenonis schola exire.'* [debauchees come from the school of Aristippus; little savages from Zeno's.]³⁴

[A] In that excellent education that Xenophon ascribed to the Persians,³⁵ we find that they taught their children to be virtuous, just as other peoples teach theirs to read. [C] Plato says that the eldest son in their royal succession was brought up as follows: at birth he was entrusted not to women but to eunuchs holding highest authority in the king's entourage on account of their virtue. They accepted responsibility for making his body fair and healthy; when he was seven they instructed him in riding and hunting. When he reached fourteen they placed him into the hands of four men: the wisest man, the most just man, the most temperate man and the most valiant man in all that nation. The first taught him religion; the second, to be ever true; the third to be master of his desires; the fourth to fear nothing.³⁶

[A] It is a matter worthy of the highest attention that in that excellent constitution which was drawn up by Lycurgus and was truly prodigious in its perfection, the education of the children was the principal duty, yet little mention was made of instruction even in the domain of the Muses; it was as though those great-hearted youths despised any yoke save that of virtue, so that they had to be provided

not with Masters of Arts but Masters of Valour, of Wisdom and of Justice – [C] an example followed by Plato in his *Laws*. [A] Their mode of teaching consisted in posing questions about the judgements and deeds of men: if the pupils condemned or praised this or that person or action, they had to justify their statement: by this means they both sharpened their understanding and learned what is right.

In Xenophon, Astiages asked Cyrus for an account of his last lesson.³⁷ ‘In our school,’ he said, ‘a big boy had a tight coat; he took a coat away from a classmate of slighter build, because it was on the big side, and gave” him his. Teacher made me judge of their quarrel and I judged that things were best left as they were, since both of them were better off by what had been done. He then showed me that I had judged badly, since I had confined myself to considering what seemed better, whereas I should first have dealt with justice, which requires that no one should be subjected to force over things which belonged to him.’ He then said he was beaten, just as we are in our village schools for forgetting the first aorist of *tuptō* [‘I thrash’]. (A dominie would have to treat me to a fine harangue in the demonstrative mode before he would convince me that his school was worth that one!) Those Persians wanted to shorten the journey, and since it is true that study, even when done properly, can only teach us what wisdom, right conduct and determination consist in, they wanted to put their children directly in touch with actual cases, teaching them not by hearsay but by actively assaying them, vigorously moulding and forming them not merely by word and precept but chiefly by deeds and examples, so that wisdom should not be something which the soul knows but the soul’s very essence and temperament, not something acquired but a natural

property.

While on this subject, when Agesilaus was asked what he thought should be taught to children he replied, 'What they should do when they are grown up.'³⁸ No wonder that education such as that should have produced such astonishing results. They used to go to other Grecian cities in search of rhetoricians, painters and musicians: the others came to Sparta for lawgivers, statesmen and generals. In Athens they learned to talk well: here, to act well; there, to unravel sophistries and set at nought the hypocrisy of words craftily intertwined; here, to free themselves from the snares of pleasure and to set at nought greatheartedly the menaces of fortune and of death; the Athenians were occupied with words: the Spartans with things; there, it was the tongue which was kept in continuous training; here, there was a continuous training of the soul. That is why it was not odd that when Antipater demanded fifty of their sons as hostages they replied (quite the opposite to what we would) that they preferred to give twice as many grown-up men, so high a value did they place on depriving the boys of their national education.³⁹ When Agesilaus urged Xenophon to send his sons to be brought up in Sparta, it was not to learn rhetoric there nor dialectic but, he said, to learn the finest subject of all: namely how to obey and how to command.⁴⁰

[C] It is most pleasing to see Socrates in his own way poking fun at Hippias, who was telling him how he had earned a great sum of money as a schoolmaster in some little towns in Sicily whereas he could not earn a penny in Sparta since Spartans are stupid people who cannot measure or count, who do not esteem grammar or prosody, merely

spending their time learning by heart the list of their kings, stories about the founding and decline of states and similar nonsense. When he had finished Socrates, by bringing him to admit in detail the excellence of the Spartans' political constitution and the happiness and virtue of their lives, let him anticipate his conclusion: that it was his own arts which were quite useless.⁴¹

Both in that martial government and in all others like it examples show that studying the arts and sciences makes hearts soft and womanish rather than teaching them to be firm and ready for war. The strongest State to make an appearance in our time is that of the Turks; and the Turkish peoples are equally taught to respect arms and to despise learning. I find that Rome was more valiant in the days before she became learned. In our time the most warlike nations are the most rude and ignorant: the Scythians, the Parthians and Tamburlane serve to prove that. When the Goths sacked Greece, what saved their libraries from being burned was the idea spread by one of the marauders that such goods should be left intact for their enemies: they had the property of deflecting them from military exercises while making them spend time on occupations which were sedentary and idle.

When our own King Charles V found himself master of the kingdom of Naples and of a large part of Tuscany without even drawing his sword, he attributed such un hoped for ease of conquest to the fact that the Italian princes and nobility spent more time becoming clever and learned than vigorous and soldierly.⁴²