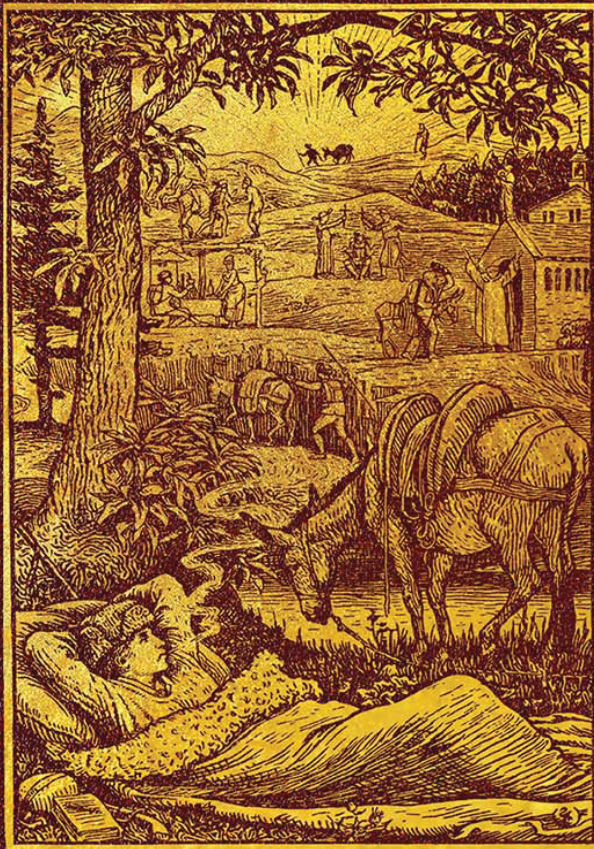


AN
APOLOGY
FOR IDLERS
&
OTHER ESSAYS

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON



EDITED BY MATTHEW KAISER

FIRST EDITION

AN APOLOGY FOR IDLERS AND OTHER ESSAYS

Robert Louis Stevenson

Edited by Matthew Kaiser



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AND OTHER ESSAYS

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INTRODUCTION

Idleness and the Essay: From Montaigne to Stevenson

The soul that has no fixed goal loses itself;
for as they say, to be everywhere is to be
nowhere. —Michel de Montaigne¹

An essay extolling the virtues of idleness is a contradiction in terms. One could even call it an “anti-essay.” Consider the generic origins of the essay, or the etymology of the word. When Michel de Montaigne invented the essay in 1572, he did so with the express purpose of combatting the toxiferous effects of idleness. For “idleness,” Montaigne lamented, “gives birth to . . . chimeras and fantastic monsters, one after another, without order or purpose.”² “[I]n order to contemplate their ineptitude and strangeness at my pleasure,” he announced, “I have begun to put them in writing, hoping in time to make my mind ashamed of itself.” Montaigne christened his invention—his baggy amalgamation of personal and philosophical musings—the *essai*, which means “trial,” “struggle,” or “attempt” in French. Montaigne’s essays are therapeutic devices, technologies of self-discipline. They are his attempts to overcome the depression into which he sank following the death of his friend Étienne de La Boétie. Psychological struggle and earnest self-cultivation are embedded, then, in the fabric of the modern essay, which was, from the start, a discursive exercise in purging the mind of lethargy.

1. Michel de Montaigne, “Of idleness,” in *The Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, trans. Donald M. Frame (New York and London: Everyman’s Library, 2003), 24.

2. *Ibid.*, 25.

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, it was commonly believed that idlers—those who had stopped struggling or attempting—were more susceptible to melancholy than their counterparts, along with insomniacs, loners, gamblers, and people with overactive imaginations. Writing in 1638, Robert Burton observed that an “idle person . . . knows not when he is well, what he would have, or whither he would go,” for “he is tired out with everything, displeased with all, weary of his life.”³ “[H]e wanders,” Burton added, “and lives besides himself.” In his *Essays* (1580–95), melancholic Montaigne set out in search of his wandering mind. To live not *beside* himself, or in spite of himself, but in the tumultuous midst of himself—this was his mission. He made his mind the locus of its scattered impressions, the center around which they swirled, rather than the passive landscape on which they rained destruction. Humanist philosopher that he was, Montaigne found himself—or rather, found a foothold in himself—not in theological systems or in totalizing theories of life, for which he had little patience. He found his foothold in the “back shop” (*arrière-boutique*) of his mind, as he called it.⁴ From his “back shop,” he fashioned discourse from disorder, took himself in hand: “Thus, reader, I am myself the matter of my book.”⁵ In a quiet tower in his chateau, halfway between Bergerac and Libourne, surrounded by the undulant fields of Dordogne, the death of his friend still gnawing at his heart, Montaigne invented the modern essay. A trained lawyer, counselor in the high court, and mayor, Montaigne did what he did best. He put his melancholy on trial. In finding a cure for idleness, in surveying his wandering thoughts, Montaigne took his place among the literary

3. Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy, What It Is, with All the Kinds, Causes, Symptoms, Prognostics, and Several Cures of It* (Birmingham, AL: The Classics of Medicine Library, 1986), 160.

4. Montaigne, 214.

5. *Ibid.*, 2.

inventors of modern subjectivity: Machiavelli and Shakespeare, Cervantes, Castiglione and Villon.

* * * * *

Three hundred years later, Robert Louis Stevenson, a twenty-six-year-old law school graduate, pens "An Apology for Idlers" (1877). His law notebooks are covered in doodles. He abandons law after passing the bar. Stevenson's defense of idleness appears in the July issue of *The Cornhill Magazine*. It is not his first published essay, nor his first time working with prestigious *Cornhill*. The experience of writing this particular piece, however, releases, then clarifies, something in his mind—call it the wellspring of his worldview. Other essays follow in a similar vein. At first blush, Stevenson seems an unlikely candidate for greatness. His parents still pay his bills. He falls in love too easily. He corresponds on a regular basis with his childhood nurse. Five foot ten, weighing less than 125 pounds, he looks insubstantial. Yet six years later Stevenson achieves greatness with *Treasure Island* (1883), followed in 1886 by *Kidnapped* and *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The spark that ignited that greatness is "An Apology for Idlers": his provocative "anti-essay," his attempt *not* to attempt, his struggle against struggling. Stevenson's intricate and elegant essays—fifteen of which are collected in this volume—celebrate idleness and its allied arts: play, immaturity, truancy, insomnia, recklessness, invalidism, mischief-making, permissiveness, languor, and wanderlust. For before he earned a reputation as a masterful short-story writer and novelist, Stevenson was known, by the few readers who knew him, as a skilled essayist and travel writer. These are the seeds that he planted in his vagabond garden: the window boxes of his readers. We wake to blossoms. In the essays that follow—all but two of which were published between 1874 and 1888 (his juvenile sketches "Nuits Blanches" and "Nurses" were published posthumously in 1896)—Stevenson proclaims the idler

and his crew to be model citizens, philosophers of love, founts of unacknowledged wisdom. He urges readers to follow the trill of Pan's pipes to the precipice of consciousness. He invites us to rethink modern subjectivity: to conceive of ourselves as points of departure rather than as towers of surveillance.

What are we to make of Stevenson's metageneric acts of devil's advocacy, his upstart essays? While most contemporary reviewers were charmed, one grumbled that young Stevenson thumbs his nose at readers, struts about with his tongue in his cheek. How seriously are we to take Stevenson's idle pronouncements? Do they mask the thing he claims to despise the most: ambition? While Stevenson certainly hoped to make a living from writing, ambition, the scramble for coin and place, was never his forte. A failed lawyer, a failed engineer, a chronic wanderer, a repeat visitor to alpine sanatoria, an opium enthusiast, Stevenson was nearly destroyed—physically and emotionally—by the Victorian cult of ambition, by the masculine imperative that he make his family proud. This does not mean, therefore, that he took his craft lightly. He loses himself in writing, tumbles down the rabbit hole—as a child loses herself in a favorite toy. Imagination is Stevenson's refuge from ambition, a means of letting go of his doubt-plagued self. At the end of his life, in the South Pacific, he lets go his name and adopts a Samoan moniker, Tusitala ("Storyteller"), defining himself by what he loves doing rather than by genealogy or by his critically acclaimed initials.

The idler does not seek wisdom and enlightenment in self-discipline, education, or trials of strength. Nor does he keep his "eye on the medal." Wisdom finds him by accident. It gathers at the side of the road, or on a riverbank, in the feral afternoons of troubadours and layabouts and truant schoolboys, whose singsong voices and bawdy nonchalance Montaigne heard, too, in his tower, in snatches, on sultry winds from country lanes. Where Montaigne resisted, Stevenson succumbs. He descends the spiral stair, follows the meandering strain. Stevenson chooses as his guide in

life the maligned idler, who goes nowhere but is "a great deal in the open air." Only idlers escape the epistemological pitfalls of the "dogmatists." Only idlers dodge the bullets of busyness. Only idlers understand "the Art of Living":

Extreme *busyness*, whether at school or college, kirk or market, is a symptom of deficient vitality; and a faculty for idleness implies a catholic appetite and a strong sense of personal identity. There is a sort of dead-alive, hackneyed people about, who are scarcely conscious of living except in the exercise of some conventional occupation. Bring these fellows into the country, or set them aboard ship, and you will see how they pine for their desk or their study. They have no curiosity; they cannot give themselves over to random provocations; they do not take pleasure in the exercise of their faculties for its own sake; and unless Necessity lays about them with a stick, they will even stand still. It is no good speaking to such folk: they *cannot* be idle, their nature is not generous enough; and they pass those hours in a sort of coma, which are not dedicated to furious moiling in the gold-mill.

Stevenson rattles the essay's ideological cage. He shakes the industrious foundations of subjectivity. He does for the essay what Wordsworth did for the ballad. Stevenson pokes fun at professionalism and money-grubbing and respectability and self-importance. He mocks the work ethic of his parents and their friends. He bemoans the weaponization of our intellects by capitalist competition. The marketplace, he fears, has transformed Montaigne's

lonely little “back shop” into an arsenal, or sweatshop, or both, where thoughts are optimized, retooled, made instruments of control and focus. With “An Apology for Idlers,” Stevenson “tries to relieve us,” Stephen Arata explains, “of the burden of paying attention, or more precisely, he encourages us to reimagine attention as a more dispersed and decentered phenomenon, one capable of inducing that ecstatic stupor he so valued.”⁶ Stevenson’s essays promote a different—less goal-oriented, more nomadic—mode of life and style of seeing. Vagabondage begins when we cease *working* on ourselves, lose ourselves along the byways, in the speckled groves, of life. Don’t take yourself so seriously, he whispers in our ear. Rather than recall our wandering thoughts, he implores us to scatter ourselves to the four winds. Whitman might contain multitudes, but Stevenson is a one-man diaspora.

For all their loveliness, their flashes of radicalism, or their intricate network of literary and biblical reference, Stevenson’s essays tend to be modest in scope and scale. Some are even trifling. They concern themselves with minor subjects: the play of children, or a sleepless night, or the pleasure of ducking behind a wall on a windy day. He is drawn to phenomena generally considered beneath essayistic notice: to the blind spots in our day and to the people we see out the corner of our eye, whom we blink away. Even his forays into irrationalism and relativism (What does it matter, we’re all going to die!) are tempered with Scottish common sense and an undying politeness. He apologizes for having troubled us. Politically, Stevenson tiptoes toward naughtiness but avoids anything that smacks of revolution. He is a Tory in his distrust of future-directed schemes and in his affection for the past, a socialist in his disgust at greed and in his rejection of hierarchy, a

6. Stephen Arata, “Stevenson, Morris, and the Value of Idleness,” in *Robert Louis Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries*, eds. Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 11.

hipster *avant la lettre* in his world-weary irony. A bit disingenuously, he presents himself as inconsequential, a nobody, a friend for an hour, though it is *his* consciousness we inhabit. The more famous he gets, the more self-deprecating his narrative voice becomes. By 1888, he has embraced the persona of well-meaning bumbler or wallflower, a man more at ease with the village beggar than with his businessman neighbor. Stevenson is forever out of place. He delights in emasculating himself. He wears boyish awkwardness as a badge of honor. Even as he limns a blustery seascape, he complains about having an earache. No wonder some of his male readers—his father, for instance—cringe. Stevenson doesn't care. Idleness is self-abasement. By refusing to tower over others, to soar rhetorically and conceptually like a Carlyle or an Arnold, Stevenson turns essay-writing on its head. Nothing—he insists—is more depressing than purpose, or self-preservation, or beating a gaggle of brains into submission. Nothing poisons the soul like a fighting spirit.

Stevenson has no interest in playing hero or leading man, and certainly not Victorian sage. Nor does he claim to be a pioneer in his beloved art of idleness. Even in idling, he plays second fiddle. He is not the first essayist, he reminds us, to sing its praises. His idle idol, the indefatigable Samuel Johnson, beat him to the punch by one hundred and twenty years. Though Stevenson never quotes *The Idler* (1758–60) directly, Johnson's name appears frequently in his essays (more often than Montaigne's, or Scott's, or Burns's, for that matter). Stevenson doffs his hat every time. He drops it once, the klutz, misquoting Boswell's *The Life of Dr. Johnson* (1791) in his epigraph to "An Apology for Idlers." Written on the eve of the Industrial Revolution, Johnson's *The Idler* anticipates Stevenson's essays in obvious ways: in its charmingly wry tone, its revaluation of idleness as an intellectual virtue, and its equation of idling with life. "The Idler, though sluggish," Johnson declares in

his first number, "is yet alive."⁷ In these and other ways, Stevenson follows in the jittery footsteps of the caffeinated lexicographer. But Johnsonian idleness differs, in key respects, from its Stevensonian second cousin. Johnson finds manly purpose in idleness. Idleness is the telos of industry, life's reward. It is another kind of work, more refined, more rarefied, but work nonetheless. Rather than scatter our psyche, Johnsonian idleness renders us coherent. In an age of increased leisure, idleness binds our subjectivity. Over the course of ninety-one essays, Johnson dismantles the wall between London's coffeehouses and Montaigne's "back shop." He reconciles the idler and the essay. He makes the essay format safe for the idler, makes idleness safe for the essay-writer. Under Johnson's pacifying quill, idleness becomes ambitious, aspirational, heroic:

Every man is, or hopes to be, an Idler. Even those who seem to differ most from us are hastening to increase our fraternity; as peace is the end of war, so to be idle is the ultimate purpose of the busy.⁸

Here Stevenson parts company with Johnson. He cannot bring himself to travel any path, no matter how charming his companion, that leads *somewhere*. Stevenson flees the broad boulevards of tomorrow, our means-to-an-end culture, a value system that subordinates the idle pleasures of the moment to the demands of the future. The telic—the purpose-driven—nature of Johnsonian idleness is antithetical to Stevenson's love of detours and meandering trails and peripateticism. Though he is not anti-intellectual, Stevenson is anti-educational in his outlook. Institutions of higher learning shackle and shrink our minds. His autobiographical essay "The Education of an Engineer" (1888) recalls with fondness the

7. Samuel Johnson, "No. 1. The Idler's Character: Saturday, April 15, 1758," in *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, Vol. 7 (London: Thomas Tegg, 1824), 4.

8. *Ibid.*, 2.

truant spirit that ends his career as an engineer before it begins. Sent to Wick in northern Scotland to assist in the construction of a seawall, apprentice Stevenson loses himself instead in vagabond activities. Rather than advance briskly through life, accumulating knowledge, learning to hold back the sea, like some Canute-in-training, Stevenson wanders the countryside near Wick, writes midnight poetry, dons a diving apparatus and treads the floor of the North Sea in slow motion—a submarine idler. How different he is from his plotting, driven colleagues! The ambitious engineer embodies, in Stevenson's eyes, the hubristic spirit of the Victorian Age. The engineers who built the Tower of Babel were ambitious too, he reminds us. In the end, our schemes collapse. Towers crumble. Death builds his house at the end of every street. Like those alienated babblers, those failed engineers whom God scattered to the four corners of the earth, nomadic Stevenson turns his attention to cultivating his voice.

Stevenson's essays seduce, rather than educate. Like Boccaccio, Villon, Byron, Baudelaire, and Kerouac, Stevenson is one of literature's great seducers. He leads readers astray. The Latin verb *educere* means "to lead forth" or "to draw out." As far as Latin verbs go, it is not Stevenson's favorite. His sympathies lie with the less respectable *seducere*, which means "to draw aside" or "to lead or carry away." Stevenson has no interest in acting as our teacher. His truant essays waylay us from the side, urge us to unlearn our lessons, to wander aimlessly at his side, or to strike out on our own. To borrow a phrase from Gabriel García Márquez, Stevenson gives us "an eternal ticket on a train that never stopped travelling."⁹ His essays are all detours and distractions, temptations and departures: the tickle of sun-drenched grass, the lingering glance of a stranger, a ruined castle on the Scottish coast. The idler turns his back on his future. What does the future

9. Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Everyman's Library, 1998), 402.

hold for us, Stevenson asks, but “a rough, war-faring existence”? Wisdom is a sideward movement; it is off road.

If Stevenson shrinks from what lies ahead, if he clings a little too eagerly to the romance of youth, it is because, poor fellow, he was dying. Stevensonian idleness is the art of dodging death. In *New Arabian Nights* (1882), his first book of short stories, he compares himself to Scheherazade, who weaves her seductive webs in order that she might escape the executioner’s blade and live another day. Diagnosed with “delicate” (pretubercular) lungs at age twenty-three and with full-blown tuberculosis at twenty-nine, Stevenson was prone to viral infections, impaired vision, fatigue, depression, migraines, and, for the last fifteen years of his life, pulmonary hemorrhaging. He barely escapes death in San Francisco in 1880, drowning in fever and blood, the ocean fog inflaming his lungs. Another sideward movement, this time by ferry to Oakland, saves his life. Stevenson lived in the shadow of death, like those “South American citizens” who “live upon the side of fiery mountains.” “[W]hat, pathologically looked at, is the human body with all its organs,” he asks, “but a mere bagful of petards?” With each shallow breath or blood-flecked cough, Stevenson hears the ticking bomb in his chest. We know now that his doctors got it wrong. His body harbored an altogether different threat. Given the fact that “advanced bacillus tests” on his sputum came back negative, medical historians, Clare Harman writes, now believe that Stevenson “may have suffered from haemorrhagic telangiectasia, or Osler-Rendu-Weber Syndrome.”¹⁰ This would explain his bouts of pulmonary hemorrhaging and his death at age forty-four from massive cerebral hemorrhage. Is it any wonder, then, that Stevenson travels backward or sideways or downward in his writings, zigging and zagging, losing himself

10. Claire Harman, *Myself and the Other Fellow: A Life of Robert Louis Stevenson* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 332.

in the South Seas or the Highlands, or chasing the setting sun west—that he goes every which way but forward?

* * * * *

The modern essay began life as a contemplation of death. Death haunts it still. Montaigne found the strength to mourn his friend Étienne de La Boétie in essay-writing, in taming his idle, melancholic thoughts. His essays gave him purpose. They taught him to move forward. Three centuries later, Robert Louis Stevenson quits the funeral procession that is the modern essay. He invites us to join him at the side of the road. Why the hurry? Nothing good lies down *that* road, he insists. That way lies “offices and the witness-box”: trials and struggles and attempts. It is a mournful business. Let’s stop here for the night, where we will have “no other tent but the sky, and no other bed than my mother earth.”¹¹

11. Robert Louis Stevenson, *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*, in *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Vol. 1, ed. Edmund Gosse (London: Cassell, 1906), 248.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

With a few minor exceptions, the texts in this volume follow the Pentland Edition of *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson* (1906–7), which was edited by Stevenson’s friend and fellow writer Edmund Gosse and published in twenty volumes in London by Cassell (in association with Chatto & Windus, William Heinemann, and Longmans Green & Company). Below, however, is the publication history of the fifteen essays collected in this volume:

“An Apology for Idlers.” *Cornhill Magazine* 36 (July 1877). Later included in Stevenson’s first book of essays, *Virginibus Puerisque and Other Papers* (London: Kegan Paul, 1881).

“Pan’s Pipes.” *London* (May 1878). Included in *Virginibus Puerisque* (1881).

“Æs Triplex.” *Cornhill Magazine* 37 (April 1878). Included in *Virginibus Puerisque* (1881).

“The Education of an Engineer” [originally titled “The Education of an Engineer: More Random Memories”]. *Scribner’s Magazine* 4 (November 1888). Later included in Stevenson’s *Across the Plains with Other Memories and Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1892).

“François Villon, Student, Poet, Housebreaker.” *Cornhill Magazine* 36 (August 1877). Later included in Stevenson’s *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1882).

“Crabbed Age and Youth.” *Cornhill Magazine* 37 (March 1878). Included in *Virginibus Puerisque* (1881).

“A Letter to a Young Gentleman who Proposes to Embrace the Career of Art.” *Scribner’s Magazine* 4 (September 1888). Included in *Across the Plains* (1892).

- "Beggars." *Scribner's Magazine* 3 (March 1888). Included in *Across the Plains* (1892).
- "Ordered South." *Macmillan's Magazine* 30 (May 1874). Included in *Virginibus Puerisque* (1881).
- "Child's Play." *Cornhill Magazine* 38 (September 1878). Included in *Virginibus Puerisque* (1881).
- "The Stimulation of the Alps." *Pall Mall Gazette* (March 5, 1881).
- "Nurses." Written c.1871. Published posthumously in the Edinburgh Edition of *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Vol. 21: *Juvenilia and Other Papers*, ed. Sidney Colvin (London: Charles Baxter and Sidney Colvin, 1896).
- "San Francisco" [originally titled "A Modern Cosmopolis"]. *The Magazine of Art* 6 (May 1883). Included in the Edinburgh Edition of *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Vol. 3: *Travels and Excursions*, ed. Sidney Colvin (London: Charles Baxter and Sidney Colvin, 1895).
- "Nuits Blanches." Written c.1871. Published posthumously in the Edinburgh Edition of *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Vol. 21: *Juvenilia and Other Papers*, ed. Sidney Colvin (London: Charles Baxter and Sidney Colvin, 1896).
- "On the Enjoyment of Unpleasant Places." *The Portfolio* 5 (November 1874).

THE ESSAYS

AN APOLOGY FOR IDLERS

BOSWELL: We grow weary when idle.

JOHNSON: That is, sir, because others being busy, we want company; but if we were idle, there would be no growing weary; we should all entertain one another.¹

Just now, when everyone is bound, under pain of a decree in absence convicting them of *lèse-respectability*,² to enter on some lucrative profession, and labour therein with something not far short of enthusiasm, a cry from the opposite party who are content when they have enough, and like to look on and enjoy in the meanwhile, savours a little of bravado and gasconade.³ And yet this should not be. Idleness so called, which does not consist in doing nothing, but in doing a great deal not recognized in the dogmatic formularies of the ruling class, has as good a right to

1. From *The Life of Dr. Johnson* (1791) by James Boswell (1740–1795), Scottish diarist and biographer. The conversation between Boswell and Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), English essayist, poet and lexicographer, occurred on October 26, 1769 at the Mitre Tavern in London. Stevenson misquotes Boswell. Johnson's response should read: "but if we are all idle, there would be no growing weary; we should all entertain one another."

2. A crime of high treason, *lèse-majesté* means to demean the majesty or dignity of the monarch. Those charged with Stevenson's fictitious crime of "*lèse-respectability*" insult middle-class values.

3. Boasting.

state its position as industry itself. It is admitted that the presence of people who refuse to enter in the great handicap race for six-penny pieces, is at once an insult and a disenchantment for those who do. A fine fellow (as we see so many) takes his determination, votes for the sixpences, and, in the emphatic Americanism, "goes for" them. And while such an one is ploughing distressfully up the road, it is not hard to understand his resentment, when he perceives cool persons in the meadows by the wayside, lying with a handkerchief over their ears and a glass at their elbow. Alexander is touched in a very delicate place by the disregard of Diogenes.⁴ Where was the glory of having taken Rome for these tumultuous barbarians, who poured into the Senate house, and found the Fathers sitting silent and unmoved by their success?⁵ It is a sore thing to have laboured along and scaled the arduous hill-tops, and when all is done, find humanity indifferent to your achievement. Hence physicists condemn the unphysical; financiers have only a superficial toleration for those who know little of stocks; literary persons despise the unlettered; and people of all pursuits combine to disparage those who have none.

But though this is one difficulty of the subject, it is not the greatest. You could not be put in prison for speaking against industry, but you can be sent to Coventry⁶ for speaking like a fool. The greatest difficulty with most subjects is to do them well; therefore, please to remember this is an apology. It is certain that much may be judiciously argued in favour of diligence; only there is

4. Plutarch (AD 46 – AD 120) describes the incident in his biography of Alexander the Great (356 BC – 323 BC). Alexander travelled to Corinth expressly to meet Diogenes of Sinope (c.412 BC – 323 BC). He found him lounging in the sun. When he asked Diogenes how he could be of service, the philosopher responded: "Stand a little out of my sun." An amused Alexander declared: "If I were not Alexander, I would be Diogenes!"

5. The Senones, a Gallic people, invaded Rome in 390 BC. When they entered the palaces of the patricians, they were greeted with haughty contempt.

6. "To send someone to Coventry" means to ostracize or shun that person. When Royalist troops were captured in Birmingham during the English Civil War (1642–51), they were sent to the city of Coventry, then a Parliamentary stronghold, where they received a chilly reception.

something to be said against it, and that is what, on the present occasion, I have to say. To state one argument is not necessarily to be deaf to all others, and that a man has written a book of travels in Montenegro, is no reason why he should never have been to Richmond.

It is surely beyond a doubt that people should be a good deal idle in youth. For though here and there a Lord Macaulay⁷ may escape from school honours with all his wits about him, most boys pay so dear for their medals that they never afterwards have a shot in their locker,⁸ and begin the world bankrupt. And the same holds true during all the time a lad is educating himself, or suffering others to educate him. It must have been a very foolish old gentleman who addressed Johnson at Oxford in these words: "Young man, ply your book diligently now, and acquire a stock of knowledge; for when years come upon you, you will find that poring upon books will be but an irksome task."⁹ The old gentleman seems to have been unaware that many other things besides reading grow irksome, and not a few become impossible, by the time a man has to use spectacles and cannot walk without a stick. Books are good enough in their own way, but they are a mighty bloodless substitute for life. It seems a pity to sit, like the Lady of Shalott,¹⁰ peering into a mirror, with your back turned on all the bustle and glamour of reality. And if a man reads very hard, as the old anecdote reminds us, he will have little time for thought.

If you look back on your own education, I am sure it will not be the full, vivid, instructive hours of truantry that you regret; you

7. Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–1859), English politician, historian and essayist. When he was a young man, Macaulay taught himself several European languages and earned multiple prizes at Cambridge University.

8. Have no money or opportunity left.

9. Johnson shared this memory with Boswell in 1763 at the Turk's Head coffee-house in London.

10. Alfred Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott" (1833) is the story of a cursed woman who sits alone in a tower, weaving images of the world reflected in her mirror. Weary at last of reflections of reflections, she abandons her loom and her tower and enters the world, whereupon she dies.

would rather cancel some lackluster periods between sleep and waking in the class. For my own part, I have attended a good many lectures in my time. I still remember that the spinning of a top is a case of Kinetic Stability. I still remember that *Emphyteusis*¹¹ is not a disease, nor *Stillicide*¹² a crime. But though I would not willingly part with such scraps of science, I do not set the same store by them as by certain other odds and ends that I came by in the open street while I was playing truant. This is not the moment to dilate on that mighty place of education, which was the favourite school of Dickens and of Balzac,¹³ and turns out yearly many inglorious masters in the Science of the Aspects of Life. Suffice it to say this: if a lad does not learn in the streets, it is because he has no faculty of learning. Nor is the truant always in the streets, for if he prefers, he may go out by the gardened suburbs into the country. He may pitch on some tuft of lilacs over a burn,¹⁴ and smoke innumerable pipes to the tune of the water on the stones. A bird will sing in the thicket, and there he may fall into a vein of kindly thought, and see things in a new perspective. Why, if this be not education, what is? We may conceive Mr. Worldly Wiseman¹⁵ accosting such an one, and the conversation that should thereupon ensue:—

“How now, young fellow, what dost thou here?”

“Truly, sir, I take mine ease.”

“Is not this the hour of the class? and shouldst thou not be plying thy Book with diligence, to the end thou mayest obtain knowledge?”

11. In Roman law, *emphyteusis* refers to a contract to lease land in perpetuity on the condition that the lessee improve the property.

12. In Roman law, *stillicide* refers to the right to collect water dripping from a neighbor's roof onto one's property.

13. Charles Dickens (1812–1870) and French novelist Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) were pioneers of literary realism.

14. A creek.

15. Mr. Worldly Wiseman is a character in *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), a Christian allegory, by Puritan preacher John Bunyan (1628–1688). A resident of the Town of Carnal Policy, and a mouthpiece for secular ethics, Mr. Worldly Wiseman waylays Christian on his journey to the Celestial City and tries to convince him that legality and civility are sufficient organizing principles for society.

"Nay, but thus also I follow after Learning, by your leave."

"Learning, quotha!¹⁶ After what fashion, I pray thee? Is it mathematics?"

"No, to be sure."

"Is it metaphysics?"

"Nor that."

"Is it some language?"

"Nay, it is no language."

"Is it a trade?"

"Nor a trade neither."

"Why, then, what is't?"

"Indeed, sir, as a time may soon come for me to go upon Pilgrimage, I am desirous to note what is commonly done by persons in my case, and where are the ugliest Sloughs¹⁷ and Thickets on the Road; as also, what manner of Staff is of the best service. Moreover, I lie here, by this water, to learn by root-of-heart a lesson which my master teaches me to call Peace, or Contentment."

Hereupon Mr. Worldly Wiseman was much commoved with passion, and shaking his cane with a very threatenful countenance, broke forth upon this wise: "Learning, quotha!" said he; "I would have all such rogues scourged by the Hangman!"

And so he would go on his way, ruffling out his cravat with a crackle of starch, like a turkey when it spreads its feathers.

Now this, of Mr. Wiseman's, is the common opinion. A fact is not called a fact, but a piece of gossip, if it does not fall into one of your scholastic categories. An inquiry must be in some acknowledged direction, with a name to go by; or else you are not inquiring at all, only lounging; and the workhouse¹⁸ is too good for you. It is supposed that all knowledge is at the bottom

16. A sarcastic "indeed!" that typically follows a word or phrase one is quoting.

17. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian must navigate various spiritual obstacles on his path to God, including the Slough of Despond, a swamp of sin and guilt.

18. In nineteenth-century Britain, the workhouse was a public institution where the destitute and homeless were provided food and shelter in return for work.

of a well, or the far end of a telescope. Sainte-Beuve,¹⁹ as he grew older, came to regard all experience as a single great book, in which to study for a few years ere we go hence; and it seemed all one to him whether you should read in Chapter XX, which is the differential calculus, or in Chapter XXXIX, which is hearing the band play in the gardens. As a matter of fact, an intelligent person, looking out of his eyes and hearkening in his ears, with a smile on his face all the time, will get more true education than many another in a life of heroic vigils. There is certainly some chill and arid knowledge to be found upon the summits of formal and laborious science; but it is all round about you, and for the trouble of looking, that you will acquire the warm and palpitating facts of life. While others are filling their memory with a lumber of words, one-half of which they will forget before the week be out, your truant may learn some really useful art: to play the fiddle, to know a good cigar, or to speak with ease and opportunity to all varieties of men. Many who have “plied their book diligently,” and know all about some one branch or another of accepted lore, come out of the study with an ancient and owl-like demeanour, and prove dry, stockish,²⁰ and dyspeptic in all the better and brighter parts of life. Many make a large fortune, who remain under-bred and pathetically stupid to the last. And meantime there goes the idler, who began life along with them—by your leave, a different picture. He has had time to take care of his health and his spirits; he has been a great deal in the open air, which is the most salutary of all things for both body and mind; and if he has never read the great Book in very recondite places, he has dipped into it and skimmed it over to excellent purpose. Might not the student afford some Hebrew roots, and the business man some of his half-crowns, for a share of the idler’s knowledge of life at large, and Art of Living? Nay, and the idler has another and more important quality than

19. Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804–1869), French literary critic.

20. Stupid.

these. I mean his wisdom. He who has much looked on at the childish satisfaction of other people in their hobbies, will regard his own with only a very ironical indulgence. He will not be heard among the dogmatists. He will have a great and cool allowance for all sorts of people and opinions. If he finds no out-of-the-way truths, he will identify himself with no very burning falsehood. His way takes him along a by-road, not much frequented, but very even and pleasant, which is called Commonplace Lane, and leads to the Belvedere²¹ of Commonsense. Thence he shall command an agreeable, if no very noble prospect; and while others behold the East and West, the Devil and the Sunrise, he will be contentedly aware of a sort of morning hour upon all sublunary things, with an army of shadows running speedily and in many different directions into the great daylight of Eternity. The shadows and the generations, the shrill doctors and the plangent²² wars, go by into ultimate silence and emptiness; but underneath all this, a man may see, out of the Belvedere windows, much green and peaceful landscape; many fire-lit parlours; good people laughing, drinking, and making love, as they did before the Flood or the French Revolution; and the old shepherd telling his tale under the hawthorn.

Extreme *busyness*, whether at school or college, kirk²³ or market, is a symptom of deficient vitality; and a faculty for idleness implies a catholic appetite and a strong sense of personal identity. There is a sort of dead-alive, hackneyed people about, who are scarcely conscious of living except in the exercise of some conventional occupation. Bring these fellows into the country, or set them aboard ship, and you will see how they pine for their desk or their study. They have no curiosity; they cannot give themselves over to random provocations; they do not take pleasure in the exercise of their faculties for its own sake; and unless Necessity

21. A building or structure that commands a beautiful or sweeping view.

22. Loud and plaintive.

23. Church.

lays about them with a stick, they will even stand still. It is no good speaking to such folk: they *cannot* be idle, their nature is not generous enough; and they pass those hours in a sort of coma, which are not dedicated to furious moiling in the gold-mill. When they do not require to go to the office, when they are not hungry and have no mind to drink, the whole breathing world is a blank to them. If they have to wait an hour or so for a train, they fall into a stupid trance with their eyes open. To see them, you would suppose there was nothing to look at and no one to speak with; you would imagine they were paralyzed or alienated; and yet very possibly they are hard workers in their own way, and have good eyesight for a flaw in a deed or a turn of the market. They have been to school and college, but all the time they had their eye on the medal; they have gone about in the world and mixed with clever people, but all the time they were thinking of their own affairs. As if a man's soul were not too small to begin with, they have dwarfed and narrowed theirs by a life of all work and no play; until here they are at forty, with a listless attention, a mind vacant of all material of amusement, and not one thought to rub against another, while they wait for the train. Before he was breeched,²⁴ he might have clambered on the boxes; when he was twenty, he would have stared at the girls; but now the pipe is smoked out, the snuff-box empty, and my gentleman sits bolt upright upon a bench, with lamentable eyes. This does not appeal to me as being Success in Life.

But it is not only the person himself who suffers from his busy habits, but his wife and children, his friends and relations, and down to the very people he sits with in a railway carriage or an omnibus. Perpetual devotion to what a man calls his business, is only to be sustained by perpetual neglect of many other things. And it is not by any means certain that a man's business is the

24. To be "breeched" means to be dressed for the first time in trousers or breeches. Prior to breeching, young boys wore dresses for purposes of toilet training.

most important thing he has to do. To an impartial estimate it will seem clear that many of the wisest, most virtuous, and most beneficent parts that are to be played upon the Theatre of Life are filled by gratuitous performers, and pass, among the world at large, as phases of idleness. For in that Theatre, not only the walking gentlemen, singing chambermaids, and diligent fiddlers in the orchestra, but those who look on and clap their hands from the benches, do really play a part and fulfil important offices towards the general result. You are no doubt very dependent on the care of your lawyer and stockbroker, of the guards and signalmen²⁵ who convey you rapidly from place to place, and the policemen who walk the streets for your protection; but is there not a thought of gratitude in your heart for certain other benefactors who set you smiling when they fall in your way, or season your dinner with good company? Colonel Newcome helped to lose his friend's money; Fred Bayham had an ugly trick of borrowing shirts; and yet they were better people to fall among than Mr. Barnes.²⁶ And though Falstaff²⁷ was neither sober nor very honest, I think I could name one or two long-faced Barabbases²⁸ whom the world could better have done without. Hazlitt mentions that he was more sensible of obligation to Northcote,²⁹ who had never done him anything he could call a service, than to his whole circle of ostentatious friends; for he thought a good companion emphatically the greatest benefactor. I know there are people in the world who cannot feel grateful unless the favour has been done

25. A railway signal-box operator.

26. Colonel Thomas Newcome and Frederick Bayham are characters in the novel *The Newcomes* (1855) by William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–1863). Barnes Newcome is the Colonel's snobbish and conniving nephew.

27. A fat, humorous and cowardly knight who appears in several of Shakespeare's plays.

28. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, grants the angry mob the power to free one of two men from prison: Jesus or Barabbas, a murderer. They choose Barabbas.

29. In *Conversations of James Northcote* (1830), English essayist William Hazlitt (1778–1830) recounts his impressions of the charismatic painter.

them at the cost of pain and difficulty. But this is a churlish disposition. A man may send you six sheets of letter-paper covered with the most entertaining gossip, or you may pass half an hour pleasantly, perhaps profitably, over an article of his; do you think the service would be greater, if he had made the manuscript in his heart's blood, like a compact with the devil? Do you really fancy you should be more beholden to your correspondent, if he had been damning you all the while for your importunity? Pleasures are more beneficial than duties because, like the quality of mercy, they are not strained, and they are twice blest. There must always be two to a kiss, and there may be a score in a jest; but wherever there is an element of sacrifice, the favour is conferred with pain, and, among generous people, received with confusion. There is no duty we so much underrate as the duty of being happy. By being happy, we sow anonymous benefits upon the world, which remain unknown even to ourselves, or when they are disclosed, surprise nobody so much as the benefactor. The other day, a ragged, barefoot boy ran down the street after a marble, with so jolly an air that he set everyone he passed into a good humour; one of these persons, who had been delivered from more than usually black thoughts, stopped the little fellow and gave him some money with this remark: "You see what sometimes comes of looking pleased." If he had looked pleased before, he had now to look both pleased and mystified. For my part, I justify this encouragement of smiling rather than tearful children; I do not wish to pay for tears anywhere but upon the stage; but I am prepared to deal largely in the opposite commodity. A happy man or woman is a better thing to find than a five-pound note. He or she is a radiating focus of good will; and their entrance into a room is as though another candle had been lighted. We need not care whether they could prove the forty-seventh proposition;³⁰ they do a better thing

30. The Pythagorean theorem, or forty-seventh proposition of Euclid, states that, in any right triangle, the sum of the squares of the two sides is equal to the square of the hypotenuse.

than that, they practically demonstrate the great Theorem of the Liveableness of Life. Consequently, if a person cannot be happy without remaining idle, idle he should remain. It is a revolutionary precept; but, thanks to hunger and the workhouse, one not easily to be abused, and, within practical limits, it is one of the most incontestable truths in the whole Body of Morality. Look at one of your industrious fellows for a moment, I beseech you. He sows hurry and reaps indigestion; he puts a vast deal of activity out to interest, and receives a large measure of nervous derangement in return. Either he absents himself entirely from all fellowship, and lives a recluse in a garret, with carpet slippers and a leaden inkpot; or he comes among people swiftly and bitterly, in a contraction of his whole nervous system, to discharge some temper before he returns to work. I do not care how much or how well he works, this fellow is an evil feature in other people's lives. They would be happier if he were dead. They could easier do without his services in the Circumlocution Office, than they can tolerate his fractious spirits. He poisons life at the well-head. It is better to be beggared out of hand by a scapegrace nephew, than daily hag-ridden by a peevish uncle.

And what, in God's name, is all this pother³¹ about? For what cause do they embitter their own and other people's lives? That a man should publish three or thirty articles a year, that he should finish or not finish his great allegorical picture, are questions of little interest to the world. The ranks of life are full; and although a thousand fall, there are always some to go into the breach. When they told Joan of Arc³² she should be at home minding women's work, she answered there were plenty to spin and wash. And so, even with your own rare gifts! When nature is "so careless of the

31. Fuss.

32. Joan of Arc (1412–1431) was a French peasant who believed that God had chosen her to lead the French army to victory against the English forces during the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453).

single life,"³³ why should we coddle ourselves into the fancy that our own is of exceptional importance? Suppose Shakespeare had been knocked on the head some dark night in Sir Thomas Lucy's³⁴ preserves, the world would have wagged on better or worse, the pitcher gone to the well, the scythe to the corn, and the student to his book; and no one been any the wiser of the loss. There are not many works extant, if you look the alternative all over, which are worth the price of a pound of tobacco to a man of limited means. This is a sobering reflection for the proudest of our earthly vanities. Even a tobacconist may, upon consideration, find no great cause for personal vainglory in the phrase; for although tobacco is an admirable sedative, the qualities necessary for retailing it are neither rare nor precious in themselves. Alas and alas! you may take it how you will, but the services of no single individual are indispensable. Atlas³⁵ was just a gentleman with a protracted nightmare! And yet you see merchants who go and labour themselves into a great fortune and thence into the bankruptcy court; scribblers who keep scribbling at little articles until their temper is a cross to all who come about them, as though Pharaoh should set the Israelites to make a pin instead of a pyramid; and fine young men who work themselves into a decline, and are driven off in a hearse with white plumes upon it. Would you not suppose these persons had been whispered, by the Master of the Ceremonies, the promise of some momentous destiny? and that this lukewarm bullet on which they play their farces was the bull's-eye and

33. From Tennyson's *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1849):

Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life (55.5-8)

34. The magistrate Thomas Lucy (1532–1600) was embroiled in a bitter feud with Shakespeare and his family. Tempers flared when Shakespeare began poaching game from Lucy's estate.

35. In Greek mythology, Atlas is a Titan condemned by Zeus to hold up the sky for eternity.

centrepoint of all the universe? And yet it is not so. The ends for which they give away their priceless youth, for all they know, may be chimerical or hurtful; the glory and riches they expect may never come, or may find them indifferent; and they and the world they inhabit are so inconsiderable that the mind freezes at the thought.