

13 *Of experience*

^BThere is no desire more natural than the desire for knowledge. We try all the ways that can lead us to it. When reason fails us, we use experience—

^CExperience, by example led,
By varied trials art has bred

MANILIUS

—^Bwhich is a weaker and less dignified means. But truth is so great a thing that we must not disdain any medium that will lead us to it. Reason has so many shapes that we know not which to lay hold of; experience has no fewer. The inference that we try to draw from the resemblance of events is uncertain, because they are always dissimilar: there is no quality so universal in this aspect of things as diversity and variety.

Both the Greeks and the Latins, and we ourselves, use eggs for the most express example of similarity. However, there have been men, and notably one at Delphi, who recognized marks of difference between eggs, so that he never took one for another; ^Cand although there were many hens, he could tell which one the egg came from.

^BDissimilarity necessarily intrudes into our works; no art can attain similarity. Neither Perrozet nor any other can smooth and whiten the backs of his cards so carefully that some gamesters will not distinguish them simply by seeing them slip through another man's hands. Resemblance does not make things so much alike as difference makes them unlike. ^CNature has committed herself to make nothing separate that was not different.

^BTherefore I do not much like the opinion of the man who thought by a multiplicity of laws to bridle the authority of judges, cutting up their meat for them. He did not realize that there is as much freedom and latitude in the interpretation of laws as in their creation. And those people must be jesting who think they can diminish and stop our disputes by recalling us to the express words of the Bible. For our mind finds the field no less spacious in registering the meaning of others than in presenting its own. As if there were less animosity and bitterness in commenting than in inventing!

We see how mistaken he was. For we have in France more laws than all the rest of the world together, and more than would be needed to rule all the worlds of Epicurus: ^C*As formerly we suffered from crimes, so now we suffer from laws* [Tacitus]. ^BAnd yet we have left so much room for opinion and decision to our judges, that there never was such a powerful and licentious freedom. What have our legislators gained by selecting a hundred thousand particular cases and actions, and apply-

ing a hundred thousand laws to them? This number bears no proportion to the infinite diversity of human actions. Multiplication of our imaginary cases will never equal the variety of the real examples. Add to them a hundred times as many more: and still no future event will be found to correspond so exactly to any one of all the many, many thousands of selected and recorded events that there will not remain some circumstance, some difference, that will require separate consideration in forming a judgment. There is little relation between our actions, which are in perpetual mutation, and fixed and immutable laws. The most desirable laws are those that are rarest, simplest, and most general; and I even think that it would be better to have none at all than to have them in such numbers as we have.

Nature always gives us happier laws than those we give ourselves. Witness the picture of the Golden Age of the poets, and the state in which we see nations live which have no other laws. Here are some who employ, as the only judge in their quarrels, the first traveler passing through their mountains. And these others on market day elect one of themselves who decides all their suits on the spot. What would be the danger in having our wisest men settle ours in this way, according to the circumstances and at sight, without being bound to precedents, past or future? For every foot its own shoe. King Ferdinand, when he sent colonists to the Indies, wisely provided that no students of jurisprudence should accompany them, for fear that lawsuits might breed in this new world, this being by nature a science generating altercation and division; judging, with Plato, that lawyers and doctors are a bad provision for a country.

Why is it that our common language, so easy for any other use, becomes obscure and unintelligible in contracts and wills, and that a man who expresses himself so clearly, whatever he says or writes, finds in this field no way of speaking his mind that does not fall into doubt and contradiction? Unless it is that the princes of this art, applying themselves with particular attention to picking out solemn words and contriving artificial phrases, have so weighed every syllable, so minutely examined every sort of combination, that here they are at last entangled and embroiled in the endless number of figures and in such minute partitions that they can no longer fall under any rule or prescription or any certain interpretation. ^c*What is broken up into dust becomes confused* [Seneca].

^bWho has seen children trying to divide a mass of quicksilver into a certain number of parts? The more they press it and knead it and try to constrain it to their will, the more they provoke the independence of this spirited metal; it escapes their skill and keeps dividing and scattering in little particles beyond all reckoning. This is the same; for by subdividing these subtleties they teach men to increase their doubts; they start us extending and diversifying the difficulties, they lengthen them, they scatter them. By sowing questions and cutting them up, they make the world fructify and teem with uncertainty and quarrels, ^cas the earth is made more fertile the more it is crumbled and deeply plowed. *Learning makes difficulties* [Quintilian].

^BWe were perplexed over Ulpian, we are still perplexed over Bartolus and Baldus. We should have wiped out the traces of this innumerable diversity of opinions, instead of wearing them as decoration and cramming the heads of posterity with them.

I do not know what to say about it, but it is evident from experience that so many interpretations disperse the truth and shatter it. Aristotle wrote to be understood; if he did not succeed, still less will another man, less able, and not treating his own ideas. By diluting the substance we allow it to escape and spill it all over the place; of one subject we make a thousand, and, multiplying and subdividing, fall back into Epicurus' infinity of atoms. Never did two men judge alike about the same thing, and it is impossible to find two opinions exactly alike, not only in different men, but in the same man at different times. Ordinarily I find subject for doubt in what the commentary has not deigned to touch on. I am more apt to trip on flat ground, like certain horses I know which stumble more often on a smooth road.

Who would not say that glosses increase doubts and ignorance, since there is no book to be found, whether human or divine, with which the world busies itself, whose difficulties are cleared up by interpretation? The hundredth commentator hands it on to his successor thornier and rougher than the first one had found it. When do we agree and say, "There has been enough about this book; henceforth there is nothing more to say about it"?

This is best seen in law practice. We give legal authority to numberless doctors, numberless decisions, and as many interpretations. Do we therefore find any end to the need of interpreting? Do we see any progress and advance toward tranquillity? Do we need fewer lawyers and judges than when this mass of law was still in its infancy? On the contrary, we obscure and bury the meaning; we no longer find it except hidden by so many enclosures and barriers.

Men do not know the natural infirmity of their mind: it does nothing but ferret and quest, and keeps incessantly whirling around, building up and becoming entangled in its own work, like our silkworms, and is suffocated in it. *A mouse in a pitch barrel* [Erasmus]. It thinks it notices from a distance some sort of glimmer of imaginary light and truth; but while running toward it, it is crossed by so many difficulties and obstacles, and diverted by so many new quests, that it strays from the road, bewildered. Not very different from what happened to Aesop's dogs, who, discovering something that looked like a dead body floating in the sea, and being unable to approach it, attempted to drink up the water and dry up the passage, and choked in the attempt. ^CTo which may be joined what a certain Crates said of the writings of Heraclitus, that they needed a good swimmer for a reader, so that the depth and weight of Heraclitus' learning should not sink him and drown him.

^BIt is only personal weakness that makes us content with what others or we ourselves have found out in this hunt for knowledge. An abler man will not rest content with it. There is always room for a successor, ^Cyes, and for ourselves, ^Band a road in another direction. There is no end to our researches; our end is in the other world. ^CIt is a sign of con-