

XIV – Superiority of the Pleasures of the Stomach

Saint-Evremond to Ninon de l'Enclos:

I have never read a letter that contained so much common sense as your last one. You eulogize the stomach so highly, that it would be shameful to possess an intelligent mind without also having a good stomach. I am indebted to the Abbé Dubois for having sounded my praises to you in this respect.

At eighty-eight years of age, I can eat oysters every morning for breakfast. I dine well and sup fairly well. The world makes heroes of men with less merit than mine.

Qu'on ait plus de bien, de crédit,
Plus de vertu, plus de conduite,
Je n'en aurai point de dépit;
Qu'un autre me passe en mérite
Sur le goût et sur l'appétit,
C'est l'avantage qui m'irrite.
L'estomac est le plus grand bien,
Sans lui les autres ne sont rien.
Un grand coeur veut tout entreprendre,
Un grand esprit veut tout comprendre;
Les droits de l'estomac sont de bien digérer;
Et dans les sentiments que me donne mon
âge,
La beauté de l'esprit, la grandeur du cour-
age,
N'ont rien qu'à se vertu l'on puisse com-
parer.

(Let others more riches and fame,
More virtue and morals possess,
'Twill kindle no envious flame;
But to make my merit seem less
In taste, appetite, is, I claim,
An outrageous thing to profess.
The stomach's the greatest of things,
All else to us nothing brings.
A great heart would all undertake,
A great soul investigate,
But the law of the stomach is good things
to digest,

And the glories, which are at my age the
delight,
True beauty of mind, of courage the height,
Are nothing unless by its virtue they're
blest.)

When I was young I admired intellect more than anything else, and was less considerate of the interests of the body than I should have been; today, I am remedying the error I then held, as much as possible, either by the use I am making of it, or by the esteem and friendship I have for it.

You were of the same opinion. The body was something in your youth, now you are wholly concerned with the pleasures of the mind. I do not know whether you are right in placing so high an estimate upon it. We read little that is worth remembering, and we hear little advice that is worth following. However degenerate may be the senses of the age at which I am living, the impressions which agreeable objects make upon them appear to me to be so much more acute, that we are wrong to mortify them. Perhaps it is a jealousy of the mind, which deems the part played by the senses better than its own.

M. Bernier, the handsomest philosopher I have ever known (handsome philosopher is seldom used, but his figure, shape, manner, conversation and other traits have made him worthy of the epithet), M. Bernier, I say, in speaking of the senses, said to me one day:

"I am going to impart a confidence that I would not give Madame de la Sablière even to Mademoiselle de l'Enclos, whom I regard as a superior being. I tell you in confidence, that abstinence from pleasures appears to me to be a great sin."

I was surprised at the novelty of the idea, and it did not fail to make an impression upon

NINON DE L'ENCLOS

my mind. Had he extended his idea, he might have made me a convert to his doctrine.

Continue your friendship which has never faltered, and which is something rare in relations that have existed as long as ours.