

Three French writers on the art of conversation

Compiled by Charles S. Roberts, MD

Doctoring is talking, and there is an art to it. We can all learn from the masters.

Marcel Proust, 1871–1922

There is a lack of tact in people who in their conversation look not to please others, but to elucidate, egotistically, points that they are interested in.

I do my intellectual work within myself, and once with other people, it's more or less irrelevant to me that they're intelligent, as long as they are kind, sincere, etc.



He was the best of listeners. Even in his intimate circle his constant care to be modest and polite prevented him from pushing himself forward and from imposing subjects of conversation. These he found in others' thoughts. Sometimes he spoke about sport and motorcycles and showed a touching desire for information. He took an interest in you, instead of trying to make you interested in himself. —GEORGES DE LAURIS ON PROUST

One can never say it enough: Proust's conversation was dazzling, bewitching. —MARCEL PLANTEVIGNES ON PROUST

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, 1533–1592

But when all is said and done, you never speak about yourself without loss. Your self-condemnation is always accredited, your self-praise discredited.

There may be some people of my temperament, I who learn better by contrast than by example, and by flight than by pursuit . . . a bad way of speaking reforms mine better than a good one.

The most fruitful and natural exercise of our mind, in my opinion, is discussion. I find it sweeter than any other action of our life; and that is the reason why, if I were right now forced to choose, I believe I would rather consent to lose my sight than my hearing or speech.

Obstinacy and heat of opinion is the surest proof of stupidity.

François La Rochefoucauld, 1613–1680

The reason why so few people are agreeable in conversation is that each is thinking more about what he intends to say than about what others are saying, and we never listen when we are eager to speak. . . . Listening well and responding well is one of the greatest perfections that one can have in conversation.

As it is the character of great minds to make many things understood with few words, so small minds, to the contrary, have the gift of talking a lot and of saying nothing.

True eloquence consists in saying everything necessary, and in saying only what is necessary.

The extreme pleasure which we take in talking about ourselves ought to make us fear that we hardly give any to those listening to us.

It is known well enough that one should hardly talk about one's wife; but it is not known well enough that one should talk about oneself even less.

Trust contributes more to conversation than wit.

We have more laziness in the mind than in the body.

Sources

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