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Remarks on the Classical part of a liberal Education.

The spirit of education seems to be gaining ground amongst us; and indeed it is high time that it should. It must be the wish, in particular, of every sound scholar, that the study of the best authors of Rome and Greece should be more highly estimated, and more diligently pursued than it is at present, or perhaps has ever been, in Virginia. To contribute in some degree, to this effect, is the purpose of the following observations. I trust it will appear that the writer has thought for himself on the subject.

Before I attempt to show the advantages of classical studies, I would offer two or three preliminary ideas. Let them not be condemned without a fair consideration.

The first is, that the prime object of youthful education, (I speak throughout this paper of the intellectual culture of the mind only,) is the training of the mental faculties to their utmost capacity and vigor of exertion. Let as much useful knowledge as possible be imbibed during the process; but this is in reality only a secondary object. The first, is to prepare the mind for the happiest efforts; and for the continual accumulation of knowledge after the maturity of manhood has been attained, and indefinitely through the progress of life. You may adopt a system to throw into the young mind, with very little labor, a great many facts and sentiments, and yet leave it after all in a state of miserable debility. What we mainly want is to have habits of steady thinking formed, the inventive powers invigorated, the judgment ripened and

cleared from the blinding mists of prejudice; and any scheme of education will be materially defective which does not keep these in view as its principal aim.

In the next place, I observe, that boys are generally set to commence the study of the classics some years too early. It appears to me, from long and careful observation, that the age of thirteen is about the best possible time for the purpose. My object is to adapt the employments of the mind to the progressive advancement of its powers. Previous to the period I have mentioned, the pupil is not qualified, ordinarily at least, for attempting the grammar of an unknown language, to good purpose. Let his most childish years be dedicated to easier things, and things, at the same time, of vital importance too. I mean, let him be taught to spell perfectly the words of his mother tongue; to read it well,—an acquisition very far from being common; to write a genteel hand, or at any rate a decent one, not a disgraceful, illegible scrawl. To these may be added, a good mastery of the rules of arithmetic; and, if you please, some other branches of practical mathematics. It must surely be disgusting to all correct taste, to see many learned scholars so shamefully deficient as they are in these qualifications of every-day necessity. There will be time enough, after the age of thirteen, for the fullest course of liberal education, if the boy be of such a description as to make such a course advisable.

And this brings me to my last preliminary; namely, that boys who are not endowed by nature with talents as high as mediocrity, or rather a little above it, should never be forced into the study of the classics at all. There are many ways of being useful, respectable, and happy in life, without being able to read Livy and Demosthenes in their original languages. A parent surrounded by wealth and splendor, and whose heart is full of ambition, does not like to admit that his son may be naturally incapable of ever shining as a scholar. But the fact may be decidedly so, notwithstanding; and what help can be found for native imbecility? The Maker of human minds dispenses their various powers according to his own will; nor does he always bestow genius in connexion with the abundant means for its cultivation. How often have I pitied the hard and useless slavery of a poor, dull child, compelled year after year to drudge through the fields of classic literature, without the smallest capacity for enjoying, or even at all relishing their beauties. He might have been training all this time for some situation calculated to promote his happiness, and make him a useful citizen.—But because his father was rich, and wilfully blind to facts,

and bent upon the lad's making a certain figure, in spite of the prohibitions of nature, the sweetest days of his youth were doomed to be wasted in a way the most irksome that imagination can conceive, and without any other fruit than the degraded standing of a mere nominal scholar. One reason, by the way, why I recommend the commencement of classical studies to be put off somewhat beyond the usual period is, that sufficient time and opportunity may be afforded to judge whether it be worth while to engage the boy in it at all or not. And this may be sufficiently ascertained by the age of thirteen, if the parent has common sense, and will apply it to the point in hand with a tolerable degree of candor.

Let us now put the Latin grammar into our tyro's hands. Be his powers what they may, a few weeks must be sedulously spent in a way the most dark, unmeaning and uncongenial, imaginable; in committing to memory a mass of declensions, conjugations, and rules of syntax contained in words and sentences to him the most uncouth and barbarous, and with scarcely a glimmering of discernment what all this Herculean labor is to accomplish. Well do I remember the overwhelming gloom of those dismal weeks! But there is no remedy. He is getting hold of the necessary tools with which he is bye and bye to work. In due time we initiate him into the business of parsing. And presently a light the most exquisitely pleasing begins to dawn upon his mind. He begins to see the application of all those strange things which he has been so painfully laying up in his brain. He perceives how his grammatical acquisitions, with the aids of his dictionary and his teacher, enable him to develope the structure and sentiments of the language he is studying. Here is an employment neither too easy nor too difficult for the present strength of his powers. His recollection, his invention, his judgment, are kept in a constant train of progressive improvement.—His taste also is awakened, and formed on models of a very high order. And this intellectual discipline I take to be the greatest benefit produced by classical studies, and the strongest argument in support of their importance as a branch of education.

This assertion, I am aware, will not quite satisfy the high-flying, enthusiastic admirers of Grecian and Roman lore.—They deem so transcendantly of the very works of the classic masters, that they pronounce the greatest modern productions poor and trifling in comparison with them. I frankly own that I have no such impression. Yet I value many of the classic volumes very highly for their own intrinsic merits. The writers of those celebrated nations have been our

teachers in poetry, in history, in philosophy, in eloquence, in criticism. And they have taught us to rival, and in some instances, I think, even to exceed them. I cannot consent that Milton, and Locke, and Whitefield shall vail, in their respective departments, to the loftiest claims of Greece or Rome. But to return.

It is often asked, why not study something that may be applied to useful purposes, instead of books in the dead languages? I answer, I know no other study so well calculated to promote the grand object which I have laid down, at the period of boyhood under consideration. The reading of works in our own language does not sufficiently exercise and strengthen the faculties. And these faculties, moreover, are not yet duly prepared for an advantageous application to speculative mathematics, or even to the study of natural science. I am training my pupil by classical labors for these still more laborious pursuits. Let me remark too, that it might puzzle the objector to find, what he calls a practical use for a great many things commonly included in the course of education, and for which the ancient languages are too often very unwisely neglected. I ask, how are we likely to apply to the conduct and business of life, our knowledge of Euclid's Elements, of Algebra, of Conic Sections, and so on? If we enquire after the utility of such studies as these, we can only find it where we chiefly find that of classical studies; namely, that they contribute, very powerfully, no doubt, to the invigoration of the mental faculties for their proper exertions in the several departments of life in which we may be placed. In the mean time, is it of no use to learn, from the original sources of information, the history of ancient nations, their laws, politics, manners, superstitions, virtues, vices, and destinies? If things like these are of no utility to be known, of what materials shall education be made to consist?

Sometimes we hear also of discarding the dead languages, and substituting in their place one or more living ones; the French, or the Italian, for instance. But why should this be done? No modern language, so far as I have heard, can vie with the Greek or Roman in dignity, beauty, and splendor; nor does any open up to us such vast treasures of interesting literature. If you have talents and leisure for the learning of languages, acquire as many of them as you can. They may all be both ornamental and useful. If you intend to travel or reside in France, it will be well to learn the language of France; and so of any other country. But we are Americans; not Frenchmen, nor Italians, nor Germans. And I can see no earthly reason for abandoning the classics to make

way for two or three modern living tongues hardly ever used, and which will be less and less used in our own country.

I do not lay very much stress upon the necessity of knowing Latin and Greek in order to a full acquaintance with our native language. That they do contribute to this, every competent judge will readily admit. But I do not think them essential in the degree which has often been pleaded. To professional studies they seem to me more important. Let any scholar open a book of Chemistry, of Anatomy, or Materia Medica; or let him open a book of law, Blackstone's Commentaries, for example, and ask himself how such works are to be studied with taste, ease, and certainty, without some tincture of classical knowledge? Is it not of still higher importance that our clergy should be able to read the Bible, the sacred code of our religion, in its original languages? Indeed, if the thing were possible to be attained, I think it would be much more desirable that every man and woman in the community should read the original scriptures, than that they should be able to speak perfectly any half a dozen foreign languages of the present day.

Still we shall hear grievous lamentations about the spending of so many precious years of youth in the study of words, in poring over volumes in the dead languages. How many years I ask? According to my plan and views, three years will be nearly or quite sufficient for the purpose. Let it be remembered that I will not, in this period, promise for a dunce, an infant in age, nor an idler. But give me a boy of thirteen, possessed of pretty good natural parts, and disposed to be industrious; and I venture to say he may, in the time specified, be made a respectable classical scholar. I have known the task to be accomplished in a much shorter period, with no other requisites than these, except a little farther advance of age at the commencement. And here again I may be charged with heresy by those scholars, certainly not very numerous in this country, who deeply underrate all kinds of learning in comparison with that of the classics.—They will say that the course of reading to be performed, even by a powerful and indefatigable student, within such a scanty portion of time, must necessarily be very limited. I grant it must, when compared with the whole mass of Greek and Roman literature which we possess. But why should the whole of that mass be read by the student? If we could divest ourselves of the antiquarian prejudice, I believe we should find reason to pronounce a considerable proportion of those numerous volumes to be of no very great importance in themselves. Besides, in a country like this, where there

are so many openings, and such loud demands for the exertion of talents and learning, it does not seem to me reasonable that our students should be delving a great number of years at studies of this kind, merely for the sake of seeing all that was written by these ancients, good, bad, and indifferent. And still farther, if any scholar has disposition and leisure, let him pursue the reading of classical authors in subsequent life to any extent that pleases him. I wish my pupil to close this sort of books about the age of sixteen, and betake himself to the various other studies which lie before him, and for which I hope he will now be happily prepared.

But in order to accomplish my purpose, I wish to see some improvements take place upon the old system of classical instruction. I will propose them to those who are at once better judges, and who have the power of applying improvements effectually.

The first is, that all translations be furnished from the hands of the student. I shall only admit an exception of one or two little elementary books, to help a boy along who is as yet extremely weak in his motions. Let him be required, as speedily as possible, to go alone, without these trammeling and opprobrious leading-strings. Translations are the very bane and pest to industry. If they be free and elegant, they bewilder the young mind; if literal, they debilitate and stupify it.

Next, I wish to see the classic authors exhibited and used without the incumbrances of modern latin. To illustrate my idea, let us open Virgil, in usum Delphini. Here you have, for a beginning, at the head of each poem or book, a pretty knotty argumentum, or table of contents. Then comes, in the margin, the exquisite poetry of Virgil, very painstakingly reduced to prose; the very life and soul of his verse annihilated as though it had never been. And then, to crown the whole, you have a large part of every page stuffed with notes; some of them useless, many very hard to understand, and all crabbed and inelegant, as the latin of modern days almost universally is. And what end do all these heavy accompaniments answer, but to pester, disgust, and retard the student? Let us have the simple text of the author, with as many notes, in good English, as are really necessary to assist the reader in his studies. The notes annexed by Mr. Murphy, to his edition of Lucian, are a fine example, which I should be glad to see followed in editions of all the classics. I would scout the whole practice of teaching one dead language through the medium of another. We begin to have grammars of the Greek written in English. But to this day

I can find no general Greek Lexicon which explains the words of the language in English. Instead of getting at my object directly, I must hunt the meaning of my Greek classic through the latin definitions of Hedericus or Schrevelius.—Mr. Parkhurst has given us a specimen of a better taste and greater accommodation in his excellent Greek and English Lexicon to the New Testament.

Once more; if it were in my power, I believe I should make some alterations in the matter selected for a course of classic studies. The quantity would, perhaps, be rather diminished than enlarged; but I should require it to be read with more care and understanding than it commonly is. I should probably expel from the schools a great portion of the poetry of Greece and Rome, and fill the vacant space with larger selections from Xenophon and Cicero. Ovid, for instance, writes extremely smooth and pretty verses. Some of his passages, (I speak of the Metamorphoses,) are every way admirable. But there is much of trash, and more than a little of vile stuff worse than trash. If any one can read all this without injury, it is not likely to be a boy at school. Similar observations are applicable to Horace. I remember when I was reading his odes at school, the idea was often impressed upon my mind, that he must have written them either in a gin-shop, or in some place still more abominable. As to Homer, his delineations and discriminations of character, as well as the structure of his poetry, are above all praise. And yet, hazardous as the sentiment may be, I will say that I find very little utility, and indeed, after a while, very little pleasure in his everlasting scenes of battle and bloodshed. The Cyropedia delights me far more, and more permanently.

And now, having sketched my thoughts freely upon a highly important subject, I shall have no objection to see them animadverted upon by any scholar in a liberal spirit. If any of my ideas are erroneous, I wish to see them corrected. Let us place the study of the classics on rational grounds; neither abandoning it tamely to the attacks of whim or ignorance, nor suffering it to assume the place, or the estimation due to studies more necessary and more valuable.

MELANCTHON.