

An Account of The Seminary That Will Be Opened On Monday, The Fourth Day of August, At Epsom In Surrey

**For The Instruction Of Twelve Pupils In The Greek, Latin, French, And English
Languages.**

William Godwin

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THE two principal objects of human power are government and education. They have accordingly engrossed a very large share in the disquisitions of the speculative in all ages. The subject of the former indeed is man, already endowed with his greatest force of body, and arrived at the exercise of his intellectual powers: the subject of the latter is man, as yet shut up in the feebleness of childhood, and the imbecility of inexperience. Civil society is great and unlimited in its extent; the time has been, when the whole known world was in a manner united in one community: but the sphere of education has always been limited. It is for nations to produce the events, that enchant the imagination, and ennoble the page of history: infancy must always pass away in the unimportance of mirth, and the privacy of retreat. That government however is a theme so much superior to education, is not perhaps so evident, as we may at first imagine.

It is indeed wider in its extent, but it is infinitely less absolute in its power. The state of society is incontestably artificial; the power of one man over another must be always derived from convention, or from conquest; by nature we are equal. The necessary consequence is, that government must always depend upon the opinion of the governed. Let the most oppressed people under heaven once change their mode of thinking, and they are free. But the inequality of parents and children is the law of our nature, eternal and uncontrollable. —Government is very limited in its power of making men either virtuous or happy; it is only in the infancy of society that it can do any thing considerable; in its maturity it can only direct a few of our outward actions. But our moral dispositions and character depend very much, perhaps entirely, upon education.—Children indeed are weak and imbecil; but it is the imbecility of spring, and not that of autumn; the imbecility that that verges towards power, and not that is already exhausted with performance. To behold heroism in its infancy, and immortality in the bud, must be a most attractive object. To mould those pliant dispositions, upon which the happiness of multitudes may one day depend, must be infinitely important.

Proportionable to what we have stated to be the importance of the subject, is the attention that has been afforded it in the republic of letters. The brightest wits, and the profoundest philosophers have emulated each other in their endeavors to elucidate so valuable a theme. In vain have pedants urged the stamp of antiquity, and the approbation of custom; there is scarcely the scheme so visionary, the execution of which has not at some time or other been attempted. Of the writers upon this interesting subject, he perhaps that has produced the most valuable treatise is Rousseau. If men of equal abilities have explored this ample field, I know of none, however, who have so thoroughly investigated the first principles of the science, or who have treated it so much at large. If he have indulged to a thousand agreeable visions, and wandered in the pursuit of many a specious paradox, he has however richly repaid us for this defect, by the profoundest researches and the most solid discoveries.

I have borrowed so many of my ideas from this admirable writer, that I thought it necessary to make this acknowledgment in the outset. The learned reader will readily perceive, that if I have not scrupled to profit from his discoveries, at least I have freely and largely dissented from him, where he appeared to me to wander from the path of truth. For my own part, I am persuaded that it can only be by striking off something of inflexibility from his system, and something of pedantry from the common one, that we can expect to furnish a medium, equally congenial to the elegance of civilization, and the manliness of virtue.

In pursuance of these principles it shall be my first business to enquire, whether or not the languages ought to make any part of the perfect system of education; and if they ought, at what time they should be commenced. The study of them does indeed still retain its ground in our public schools and universities. But it has received a rude shock from some writers of the present age; nor has any attack been more formidable, than that of the author of *Emile*. Let us endeavor to examine the question, neither with the cold prejudice of antiquity on the one hand; nor on the other, with the too eager thirst of novelty, and unbounded admiration of the geniuses, by whom it has been attacked.

When we look back to the venerable ancients, we behold a class of writers, if not of a much higher rank, at least of a very different character, from the moderns. One natural advantage they indisputably possessed. The field of nature was all their own. It had not yet been blasted by any vulgar breath, or touched with a sacrilegious hand. Its fairest flowers had not been culled, and its choicest sweets rifled before them. As they were not encumbered and hedged in with the multitude of their predecessors, they did not servilely borrow their knowledge from books; they read it in the page of the universe. They studied nature in all her romantic senses, and all her secret haunts. They studied men in the various ranks of society, and in different nations of the world. I might add to this several other advantages. Of these the noble freedom of mind that was characteristic of the republicans of Greece and Rome, and that has scarcely and parallel among ourselves, would not be the least.

Agreeably to these advantages, they almost every where, particularly among the Greeks, bear upon them the stamp of originality. All copies are feeble and unmarked. They sacrifice the plainness of nature to the gaudiness of ornament, and the tinsel of wit. But the ancients are full of a noble and affecting simplicity. By one touch of nature and observation they paint a scene more truly, than their successors are able to do in whole wire-drawn pages. In description they are unequalled. Their eloquence is fervent, manly and sonorous. Their thoughts are just, natural, independent and profound. The pathos of Virgil, and the sublimity of Homer, have never been surpassed. And as their knowledge was not acquired in learned indolence, they knew how to join

the severest application with the brightest genius. Accordingly in their style they have united simplicity, eloquence and harmony, in a manner of which the moderns have seldom had even an idea. The correctness of a Cæsar, and the sonorous period of a Cicero; the majesty of a Virgil, and the politeness of a Horace, are such as no living language can express.

It is the remark of a certain old-fashioned writer, "The form of the world passeth away." A century or two ago the greatest wits were known to have pathetically lamented, that the writers, of whose merits I have been speaking, were handed down to us in so mutilated a condition. Now it seems very probable, that, if their works were totally annihilated, it would scarcely call forth a sigh from the refined geniuses of the present age. It is certainly very possible to carry the passion for antiquity to a ridiculous extreme. No man can reasonably deny, that it is by us only that the true system of the universe has been ascertained, and that we have made very valuable improvements upon many of the arts. No man can question that some of our English poets have equaled the ancients in sublimity, and that, to say the least, our neighbours, the French, have emulated the elegance of their composition in a manner, that is very far indeed from contempt. From these concessions however we are by no means authorised to infer their inutility.

But I shall be told that in the first revival of letters the study of the ancient languages might indeed be very proper; but since that time we have had so many excellent translations of everything they contain, that to waste the time, and exhaust the activity of our youth in the learning of Latin and Greek, is to very little purpose indeed. Translation! What a strange word! To me I confess it appears the most unaccountable invention, that ever entered into the mind of man. To distil the glowing conceptions, and to travesty the beautiful language of the ancients, through the medium of a language estranged to all its peculiarities and all its elegancies. The best thoughts and expressions of an author, those that distinguish one writer from another, are precisely those that are least capable of being translated. And who are the men we are to employ in this promising business? Original genius disdains the unmeaningful drudgery. A mind that has one feature resembling the ancients, will scarcely stoop to be their translator. The persons then, to whom the performance must be committed, are persons of cool elegance. Endowed with a little barren taste, they must be inanimate enough to tread with laborious imbecility in the footsteps of another. They must be eternally incapable of imbibing the spirit, and glowing with the fire of their original. But we shall seldom come off so well as this. The generality of translators are either on the one hand mere pedants and dealers in words, who, understanding the grammatical construction of a period, never gave themselves the trouble to enquire, whether it conveyed either sentiment or instruction; or on the other hand mere writers or hire, the retainers of a bookseller, men who translate Homer from the French, and Horace out of Creech.

Let it not be said that I am now talking at random. Let us descend to examples. We need not be afraid of instancing in the most favourable. I believe it is generally allowed that Mr. Pope's Iliad is the very best version that was ever made out of one language into another. It must be confessed to exhibit very many poetical beauties. As a trial of skill, as an instance of what can be effected upon so forlorn a hope, it must ever be admired. But were I to search for a true idea of the style and composition of Homer, I think I should rather recur to the verbal translation in the margin of the original, than to the version of Pope. Homer is the simplest and most unaffected of the poets. Of all the writers of elegance and taste that ever existed, his translator is the most ornamented. We acknowledge Homer by his loose and flowing robe, that does not constrain a muscle of his frame. But Pope presents himself in the close and ungraceful habit of modern times;

"Glittering with gems, and stiff with woven gold."

No, let us for once conduct ourselves with honesty and generosity. If we will not study the ancients in their own nervous and manly page, let us close their volumes for ever. I had rather, says the amiable philosopher of Chaeronea, it should be said of me, that there never was such a man as Plutarch, than that Plutarch was ill-natured, arbitrary, and tyrannical. And were I the bard of Venusia, sure I am, I had rather be entirely forgotten, than not to be known for the polite, the spirited, and the elegant writer I really was.

To converse with the accomplished, is the obvious method by which to become accomplished ourselves. This general observation is equally applicable to the study of polite writers of our own and of other countries. But there are some reasons, upon account of which we may expect to derive a more perceptible advantage from the ancients. They carried the art of composition to greater heights than any of the moderns. Their writers were almost universally of a higher rank in society, than ours. There did not then exist the temptation of gain to spur men on to the profession of an author. An industrious modern will produce twenty volumes, in the time that Isocrates employed to polish one oration.

Another argument flows from the simple circumstance of their writing in a different language. Of all the requisites to the attainment either of a style of our own, or a discernment in that of others, the first is grammar. Without this, our ideas must be always vague and desultory. Respecting the delicacies of composition, we may guess, but we can never decide and demonstrate. Now, of the minutiae of grammar, scarcely any man ever attained a just knowledge, who was acquainted with only one language. And if the study of others be the surest, I will venture also to pronounce it the easiest method for acquiring a mastery in philology.

From what has been said, I shall consider this conclusion as sufficiently established, that the languages ought at some time to be learned by him who would form to himself a perfect character. I proceed to my second enquiry, at what time the study of them should be commenced? And here I think this to be the best general answer: at the age of ten years.

In favour of so early a period one reason may be derived from what I have just been mentioning. The knowledge of more languages than one, is almost an indispensable prerequisite to the just understanding either of the subject of grammar in particular, or of that of style in general. Now if the cultivation of elegance and propriety be at all important, it cannot be entered upon too soon, provided the ideas are already competent to the capacity of the pupil. The Roman Cornelia, who never suffered a provincial accent, or a grammatical barbarism in the hearing of her children, has always been cited with commendation; and the subsequent rhetorical excellence of the Gracchi has been in a great degree ascribed to it. Fluency, purity and ease are to be acquired by insensible degrees; and against habits of this kind I apprehend there can be no objection.

Another argument of still greater importance is, that the knowledge of languages has scarcely ever been mastered, but by those, the commencement of whose acquaintance with them was early. To be acquainted with any science slightly and superficially, can in my opinion be productive of little advantage. But such an acquaintance with languages must be very useless indeed. What benefit can it be expected that we should derive from an author, whom we cannot peruse with facility and pleasure? The study of such an author will demand a particular strength of resolution, and aptitude of humour. He can scarcely become the favourite companion of our retirement, and the never-failing solace of our cares. Something of slow and saturnine must be the necessary accompaniment of that disposition, that can conquer the difficulties of such a pursuit. And accordingly we find that the classes and the school are generally quitted together, even by persons of taste, who have not acquired a competent mastery of them in their course of education.

Very few indeed have been those, who, estranged to the languages till the age of manhood, have after that period obtained such a familiarity with them, as could ever be productive of any considerable advantage. Brutes and savages are totally unacquainted with lassitude and spleen, the lust of variety, and the impatience of curiosity. In a state of society our ideas habitually succeed in a certain proportion, and an employment that retards their progress, speedily becomes disagreeable and tedious. But children, not having yet felt this effect of civilization, are not susceptible to this cause of disgust. They are endowed with a pliability and versatility of mind, that with a little attention and management may easily be turned to any pursuit. Their understandings not yet preoccupied, they have a singular facility of apprehending, and strength of retention. It is certain this pliability and facility are very liable to abuse. It is not easy to believe, that they were given to learn words without meaning; terms of art, not understood by the pupil; the systems of theologians, and the jargon of metaphysics. But then neither were they given without a capacity of being turned to advantage. And it should seem that it could not be a very fallacious antidote to abuse, to confine our instructions to such kinds of knowledge, as are of the highest importance, and are seldom learned with success, and even scarcely attainable, at any other period.

Let it be observed that I have not fixed upon the age of ten years at random. It is the observation of Rousseau; Both children and men are essentially feeble. Children, because however few be their wants, they are unable to supply them. Men, in a state of society, because whatever be their absolute strength, the play of the imagination renders their desires yet greater. There is an intermediate period, in which our powers having made some progress, and the artificial and imaginary wants being unknown, we are relatively strong. And this he represents as the principal period of instruction. This remark is indeed still more striking, when applied to a pupil, progress of whose imagination is sedulously retarded. But it is not destitute either of truth or utility in the most general application we can possibly give it. Let it be observed, that Rousseau fixes the commencement of this period at twelve years. I would choose to take it at ten.

However we may find it convenient to distribute the productions of nature into classes, and her operations into epochs, yet let it be remembered, that her progress is silent and imperceptible. Between a perfect animal and vegetable, the distinction is of the highest order. Between distant periods we may remark the most important differences. But the gradations of nature are uninterrupted. Of her chain every link is complete. As therefore I shall find in commencing at ten years, that my time will be barely sufficient for the purposes to which I would appropriate it, I consider this circumstance as sufficient to determine my election. A youth of ten years is omnipotent, if we contrast him with a youth of eight.

But if the languages constitute so valuable a part of a just system of education, the next question is, in what manner they are to be taught. Indeed, I believe, if the persons employed in the business of education had taken half the pains to smooth the access to this department of literature, that they have employed to plant it round with briars and thorns, its utility and propriety, in the view we are now considering it, would scarcely have been questioned.

There is something necessarily disgusting in the forms of grammar. Grammar therefore is made in our public schools the business of a twelvemonth. Rules are heaped upon rules with laborious stupidity. To render them the more formidable, they are presented to our youth in the very language, the first principles of which they are designed to teach. For my own part, I am persuaded the whole business of grammar may be dispatched in a fortnight. I would only teach the declensions of nouns, and the inflexions of verbs. For the rest, nothing is so easily demonstrated, as that the auxiliary sciences are best communicated in connection with their

principals. Chronology, geography, are never so thoroughly understood, as by him that treats them literally as the handmaid of history. He, who is instructed in Latin with clearness and accuracy, will never be at a loss for the rules of grammar.

But to complete the disgust we seem so careful to inspire, the learned languages are ever surrounded with the severity of discipline; and it would probably be thought little short of sacrilege to discompose their features with a smile. Such a mode of proceeding can never be sufficiently execrated.

Indeed, I shall be told, "this is the time to correct the native vices of the mind. In childhood the influence of pain and mortification is comparatively trifling. What then can be more judicious than to accumulate upon this period, what must otherwise fall with tenfold mischief upon the age of maturity?" In answer to this reasoning, let it be first considered, how many there are, who by the sentence of nature are called out of existence, before they can live to reap these boasted advantages. Which of you is there, that has not at some time regretted that age, in which a smile is ever upon the countenance, and peace and serenity at the bottom of the heart? How is it you can consent to deprive these little innocents of an enjoyment, that slides so fast away? How is it you can find in your heart to pall these fleeting years with bitterness and slavery? The undesigning gaiety of youth has the strongest claim upon your humanity. There is not in the world a truer object of pity, than a child terrified at every glance, and watching, with anxious uncertainty, the caprices of a pedagogue. If he survive, the liberty of manhood is dearly bought by so many heart aches. And if he die, happy to escape your cruelty, the only advantage he derives from the sufferings you have inflicted, is that of not regretting a life, of which he knew nothing but the torments.

But who is it that has told you, that the certain, or even the probable consequences of this severity are beneficial? Nothing is so easily proved, as that the human mind is pure and spotless, as it came from the hands of God, and that the vices of which you complain, have their real source in those shallow and contemptible precautions, that you pretend to employ against them. Of all the conditions to which we are incident, there is none so unpropitious to whatever is ingenuous and honourable, as that of a slave. It plucks away by the root all sense of dignity, and all manly confidence. In those nations of antiquity, most celebrated for fortitude and heroism, their youth had never their haughty and unsubmitting neck bowed to the inglorious yoke of a pedagogue. To borrow the idea of that gallant assertor of humanity, sir Richard Steele: I will not say that our public schools have not produced many great and illustrious characters; but I will assert, there was not one of those characters, that would not have been more manly and venerable, if they had never been subjected to this vile and sordid condition.

Having thus set aside the principal corruptions of modern education, the devising methods for facilitating the acquisition of languages will not be difficult. The first books put into the hands of a pupil should be simple, interesting, and agreeable. By their means, he will perceive a reasonableness and a beauty in the pursuit. If he be endowed by nature with a clear understanding, and the smallest propensity to literature, he will need very little to stimulate him either from hope or fear.

Attentive to the native gaiety of youth, the periods, in which his attention is required, though frequent in their returns, should in their duration be short and inoppressive. The pupil should do nothing merely because he is seen or heard by his preceptor. If he have companions, still nothing more is requisite, than that degree of silence and order, which shall hinder the attention of any from being involuntarily diverted. The pupil has nothing to conceal, and no need of falsehood.

The approbation of the preceptor respects only what comes directly under his cognizance, and cannot be disguised. Even here, remembering the volatility and sprightliness, inseparable from the age, humanity will induce him not to animadvert with warmth upon the appearances of a casual distraction, but he will rather solicit the return of attention by gentleness, than severity.

But of all rules, the most important is that of the preserving an uniform, even tenour of conduct. Into the government of youth passion and caprice should never enter. The gentle yoke of the preceptor should be confounded as much as possible, with the eternal laws of nature and necessity. The celebrated maxim of republican government should be adopted here. The laws should speak, and the magistrate be silent. The constitution should be for ever unchangeable and independent of the character of him that administers it.

Nothing can certainly be more absurd than the attempt to educate children by reason. We may be sure they will treat every determination as capricious, that shocks their inclination. The chef d'œuvre of a good education is to form a reasonable human being; and yet they pretend to govern a child by argument and ratiocination. This is to enter upon the work at the wrong end, and to endeavour to convert the fabric itself into one of the tools by which it is constructed. The laws of the preceptor ought to be as final and inflexible, as they are mild and humane.

There is yet another method for facilitating the acquisition of languages, so just in itself, and so universally practicable, that I cannot forbear mentioning it. It is that of commencing with the modern languages, French for instance in this country. These in the education of our youth, are universally postponed to what are stiled the learned languages. I shall perhaps be told that modern tongues being in a great measure derived from the Latin, the latter is very properly to be considered as introductory to the former. But why then do we not adopt the same conduct in every instance? Why to the Latin do we not premise the Greek, and to the Greek the Coptic and Oriental tongues? Or how long since is it, that the synthetic has been proved so much superior to the analytic mode of instruction? In female education, the modern languages are taught without all this preparation; nor do I find that our fair rivals are at all inferior to the generality of our sex in their proficiency. With the youth of sense and spirit of both sexes, the learning of French is usually considered, rather as a pleasure, than a burden. Were the Latin communicated in the same mild and accommodating manner, I think I may venture to pronounce, that thus taken in the second place, there will be no great difficulty in rendering it equally attractive.

I would just observe that there is an obvious propriety in the French language being learned under the same direction, as the Latin and Greek. The pursuit of this elegant accomplishment ought at no time to be entirely omitted. But the attention of youth is distracted between the method of different masters, and their amiable confidence, in the direction under which they are placed, entirely ruined by mutability and inconstance. The same observation may also be applied here, as in the learned languages. The attention of the pupil should be confined as much as possible to the most classical writers; and the French would furnish a most useful subsidiary in a course of history. Let me add, that though I have prescribed the age of ten years, as the most eligible for the commencement of classical education, I conceive there would be no impropriety in taking up the modern language so early as nine.

Such then is the kind of subjection, that the learning of languages demands. The question that recurs upon us is; How far this subjection may fairly be considered as exceptionable, and whether its beneficial consequences do not infinitely outweigh the trifling inconveniences that may still be ascribed to it?

But there is another subject that demands our consideration. Modern education not only corrupts the heart of our youth, by the rigid slavery to which it condemns them, it also undermines their reason, by the unintelligible jargon with which they are overwhelmed in the first instance, and the little attention, that is given to the accommodating their pursuits to their capacities in the second.

Nothing can have a greater tendency to clog and destroy the native activity of the mind, than the profuseness with which the memory of children is loaded, by nurses, by mothers, by masters. What can more corrupt the judgment, than the communicating, without measure, and without end, words entirely devoid of meaning? What can have a more ridiculous influence upon our taste, than for the first verses to which our attention is demanded, to consist of such strange and uncouth jargon? To complete the absurdity, and that we may derive all that elegance and refinement from the study of languages, that it is calculated to afford, our first ideas of Latin are to be collected from such authors, as Corderius, Erasmus, Eutropius, and the *Selectæ*. To begin indeed with the classical writers, is not the to smooth the path of literature. I am of opinion however, that one of the above-mentioned authors will be abundantly sufficient. Let it be remembered, that the passage from the introductory studies to those authors, that form the very essence of the language, will be much facilitated by the previous acquisition of the French.

Having spoken of the article of memory, let me be permitted to mention the practice, that has of late gained so great a vogue; the instructing of children in the art of spouting and acting plays. Of all the qualities incident to human nature, the most universally attractive is simplicity, the most disgusting is affectation. Now what idea has a child of the passions of a hero, and the distresses of royalty? But he is taught the most vehement utterance, and a thousand constrained cadences, without its being possible that he should see in them, either reasonableness or propriety.

I would not have a child required to commit any thing to memory more than is absolutely necessary. If, however, he be a youth of spirit, he will probably lean some things in this manner, and the sooner because it is not expected of him. It will be of use for him to repeat these with a grave and distinct voice, accommodated to those cadences, which the commas, the periods, and the notes of interrogation, marked in his author, may require, but without the smallest instruction to humour the gay, or to sadden the plaintive.

Another article, that makes a conspicuous figure in the education of our youth, is composition. Before they are acquainted with the true difference between verse and prose, before they are prepared to decide upon the poetical merit of Lily and Virgil, they are called upon to write Latin verse themselves. In the same manner some of their first prose compositions are in a dead language. An uniform, petty, ridiculous scheme is laid down, and within that scheme all their thoughts are to be circumscribed.

Composition is certainly a desirable art, and I think can scarcely be entered upon too soon. It should be one end after which I would endeavour, and the mode of effecting it will be farther illustrated in the sequel, to solicit a pupil to familiarity, and to induce him to disclose his thoughts upon such subjects as were competent to his capacity, in an honest and simple manner. After having thus warmed him by degrees, it might be proper to direct him to write down his thoughts, without any prescribed method, in the natural and spontaneous manner, in which they flowed from his mind. Thus the talk of throwing his reflections upon paper would be facilitated to him, and his style gradually formed, without teaching him any kind of restraint and affection. To the reader who enters at all into my ideas upon the subject, it were needless to subjoin that I should never think of putting a youth upon the composition of verse.

From all I have said it will be sufficiently evident, that it would be a constant object with me to model my instructions to the capacity of my pupil. They are books, that beyond all things teach us to talk without thinking, and use words without meaning. To this evil there can be no complete remedy. But shall we abolish literature, because it is not unaccompanied with inconveniencies? Shall we return to a state of savage ignorance, because all the advantages of civilization have their attendant disadvantages?

The only remedy that can be applied, is to accustom ourselves to clear and accurate investigation. To prefer, wherever we can have recourse to it, the book of nature to any human composition. To begin with the latter as late as may be consistent with the most important purposes of education. And when we do begin, so to arrange our studies, as that we may commence with the simplest and easiest sciences, and proportion our progress to the understanding of the pupil?

With respect to grammar in particular, the declensions of nouns, and the inflexions of verbs, we may observe, that to learn words to which absolutely no ideas are affixed, is not to learn to think loosely, and to believe without being convinced. These certainly can never corrupt the mind. And I suppose no one will pretend, that to learn grammar, is to be led to entertain inaccurate notions of the subjects, and which it is particularly conversant. On the contrary, the ideas of grammar are exceedingly clear and accurate. It has, in my opinion, all those advantages, by which the study of geometry is usually recommended, without any of its disadvantages. It tends much to purge the understanding, to render it close in its investigations, and sure in its decisions. It introduces more easily and intelligibly than mathematical science, that most difficult of all the mental operations, abstraction. It imperceptibly enlarges our conceptions, and generalizes our ideas.

But if to read its authors, be the most valuable purpose of learning a language, the grammar will not be sufficient. Other books will be necessary. And how shall these be chosen, so as not to leave behind us the understanding of our pupil? Shall we introduce him first to the sublime flights of Virgil, the philosophical investigations of a Cicero, or the refined elegance and gay satire of Horace? Alas! if thus introduced unprepared to the noblest heights of science, how can it be expected that his understanding should escape the shipwreck, and every atom of common sense not be dashed and scattered ten thousand ways?

The study then I would here introduce, should be that of history. And that this study is not improper to the age with which I connect it, is the second point I would endeavor to demonstrate.

But is history, I shall be asked, the study so proper for uninstructed minds? History, that may in some measure be considered as concentrating in itself the elements of all the other sciences? History, by which we are informed of the rise and progress of every art, and by whose testimony the comparative excellence of every art is ascertained? History, the very testimony of which is not to be admitted, without the previous trial of metaphysical scrutiny, and philosophic investigation? Lastly, History, that is to be considered as a continual illustration of the arts of fortification and tactics; but above all of politics, with its various appendages, commerce, manufacture, finances?

To all this, I calmly answer, No: it is not history in any of these forms, that constitutes the science to which I would direct the attention of my pupil. Of the utility of the history of arts and science, at least, as a general study, I have no very high opinion. But were my opinion ever so exalted, I should certainly chuse to postpone this study for the present. I should have as little to do with tactics and fortification. I would avoid as much as possible the very subject of war. Politics, commerce, finances, might easily be deferred. I would keep far aloof from the niceties of chronology, and the dispute of facts. I would not enter upon the study of history through the

medium of epitome. I would even postpone the general history of nations, to the character and actions of particular men.

Many of the articles I have mentioned, serve to compose the pedantry of history. Than history, no science has been more abused. It has been studied from ostentation; it has been studied with the narrow views of little minds; it has been warped to serve a temporary purpose. Ingenious art has hung it round with a thousand subtleties, and a thousand disputes. The time has at length arrived, when it requires an erect understanding, and a penetrating view, above the common rate, to discover the noble purposes, which this science is most immediately calculated to subserve.

In a word, the fate of history has been like that of traveling. The institution has been preserved, but its original use is lost. One man travels from fashion, and another from pride. One man travels to measure buildings, another to examine pictures, and a third perhaps to learn to dance. Scarcely any remember that its true application is to study men and manners. Perhaps a juster idea cannot be given of the science we are considering, than that which we may deduce from a reflection of Rousseau. "The ancient historians," says he, "are crowded with those views of things, from which we may derive the utmost utility, even though the facts that suggest them, should be mistaken. But we are unskilled to derive any real advantage from history. The critique of erudition absorbs everything; as if it imported us much whether the relation were true, provided we could extract from it any useful information. Men of sense ought to regard history as a tissue of fables, whose moral is perfectly adapted to the human heart."

The mere external actions of men are not worth the studying: Who would have ever thought of going through a course of history, if the science were comprised in the set of chronological tables? No: it is the hearts of men we should study. It is to their actions, as expressive of disposition and character, we should attend. But by what is it that we can be advanced thus far, but by specious conjecture, and plausible inference? The philosophy of a Sallust, and the sagacity of a Tacitus, can only advance us to the regions of probability. But whatever be the most perfect mode of historical composition, it is to the simplest writers that our youth should be first introduced, writers equally distant from the dry detail of Du Fresnoy, and the unrivalled eloquence of a Livy. The translation of Plutarch would, in my opinion, form the best introduction. As he is not a writer of particular elegance, he suffers less from a version, than many others. The Roman revolutions of Vertot might very properly fill in the second place. Each of these writers has this further recommendation, that, at least, in the former part of their works, they treat of that simplicity and rectitude of manners of the first Greeks and Romans, that furnish the happiest subject that can be devised for the initiating youth in the study of history.

Under the restrictions I have laid down, history is of all sciences the most simple. It has been ever considered by philosophers, as the porch of knowledge. It has ever been treated by men of literature, as the relaxation of their severer pursuits. It leads directly to the most important of all attainments, the knowledge of the heart. It introduces us, without expence, and without danger, to an acquaintance with manners and society. By the most natural advances it points us forward to all the depths of science. With the most attractive blandishments it forms us by degrees to an inextinguishable thirst of literature.

But there is still an objection remaining, and that the most important of all. Let history be stripped as much as you will of every extraneous circumstance, let it be narrowed to the utmost simplicity, there is still one science previously necessary. It is that of morals. If you see nothing in human conduct, but purely the exterior and physical movements, what is it that history teaches? Absolutely nothing; and the science devoid of interest, becomes incapable of affording either

pleasure of instruction. We may add, that the more perfectly it is made a science of character and biography, the more indispensable is ethical examination. But to such an examination it has been doubted whether the understandings of children be competent. Upon this question I will beg leave to say a few words, and I have done.

It is scarcely necessary to observe, that I do not speak here of ethics as an absolute science, but simply as it relates to practice, and the œconomy of human life. Our enquiry therefore is respecting the time at which that intuitive faculty is generally awakened, by which we decide upon the differences of virtue and vice, and are impelled to applaud the one, and condemn the other.

The moment in which the faculty of memory begins to unfold itself, the man begins to unfold himself, the man begins to exist as a moral being. Not long posterior to this, is the commencement of prescience and foresight. Rousseau has told us, in his animated language, that if a child could escape a whipping, or obtain a paper of sweetness, by promising to throw himself out at window tomorrow, the promise would instantly be made. Nothing is more contrary to experience than this. It is true, death, or any such evils, of which he has no clear conception, do not strongly affect him in prospect. But by the view of that which is palpable and striking, he is as much influenced as any man, however extensive his knowledge, however large his experience. It is only by seizing upon the activity and earnestness incident to youthful pursuits, and totally banishing the idea of what is future, that we can destroy its influence. Their minds, like a sheet of white paper, are susceptible to every impression. Their brain, uncrowded with a thousand confused traces, is a cause, that every impression they receive is strong and durable.

The æra of foresight is the æra of imagination, and imagination is the grand instrument of virtue. The mind is the seat of pleasure and pain. It is not by what we see, but by what we infer and suppose, that we are taught, that any being is the object of commiseration. It is by the constant return of the mind to the unfortunate object, that we are strongly impressed with sympathy. Hence it is that the frequent recurrence of objects of distress, at the same time that it blunts the imagination, renders the heart callous and obdurate.

The sentiment that the persons about us have life and feeling as well as ourselves, cannot be of very late introduction. It may be forwarded by cultivation, but it can scarcely at any rate be very much retarded. For this sentiment to become perfectly clear and striking, and to be applied in every case that may come before us, must undoubtedly be an affair gradual in its progress. From thence to the feelings of right and wrong, of compassion and generosity, there is but one step.

It has, I think, been fully demonstrated by that very elegant philosopher Mr. Hutcheson, that self-love is not the source of all our passions, but that disinterested benevolence has its seat in the human heart. At present it is necessary for me to take this for granted. The discussion would lead me too far from my subject. What I would infer from it is, that benevolent affections are capable of a very early commencement. They do not wait to be grafted upon the selfish. They have the larger scope in youthful minds, as such have not yet learned those refinements of interest, that are incident to persons of longer experience.

Accordingly no observation is more common, than that mankind are more generous in the earlier periods of their life, and that their affections become gradually contracted the farther they advance in the vale of years. Confidence, kindness, benevolence, constitute the entire temper of youth. And unless these amiable dispositions be blasted in the bud by the baneful infusions of

ambition, vanity and pride, there is nothing with which they would not part, to cherish adversity, and remunerate favour.

Hence we may infer, that the general ideas of merit and character are perfectly competent to the understanding of children of ten years. False glory is the farthest in the world from insinuating its witchcraft into the undepraved heart, where the vain and malignant passions have not yet erected their standard. It is true, the peculiar sublimities of heroism cannot be supposed perfectly within his comprehension. But something of this sort, as we have already said, is incident to every step in the scale of literature.

But the more perfectly to familiarize to my pupil the understanding and digesting whatever he read, I would consider it as an indispensable part of my business, to talk over with him familiarly the subjects, that might necessarily demand our attention. I would lead him by degrees to relate with clearness and precision the story of his author. I would induce him to deliver his fair and genuine sentiments upon every action and character that came before us. I would frequently call upon him for a plain and simple reason for his opinion. This should always be done privately, without ostentation, and without rivalry. Thus, separate from the danger of fomenting those passions of envy and pride, that prepare at a distance for our youth so many mortifications, and at the expense of which too frequently this accomplishment is attained, I would train him to deliver his opinion upon every subject with freedom, perspicuity and fluency. Without at any time dictating to him the sentiments it became him to entertain, I might, with a little honest artifice, mould his judgment into the form it was most desirable it should take, at the same time that I discovered his genius, and ascertained the original propensities of his mind.

It is unnecessary for me to say any thing respecting morals in the other sense of the word, I mean as they are connected with the conduct, the habits of which we should endeavour to cultivate in a pupil; as that subject has been already exhausted. The vices of youth spring not from nature, who is equally the kind and blameless mother of all her children; they derive from the defects of education. We have already endeavoured to shut up all the inlets of vice. We have precluded servility and cowardice. We have taken away the motives to concealment and falshood. By the liberal indulgence we have prescribed, we have laid the foundation of manly spirit, and generous dignity. A continual attention to history, accompanied with the cultivation of moral discernment, and animated with the examples of heroic virtue, could not fail to form the heart of the pupil, to all that is excellent. At the same time, by assiduous care, the shoots of vanity and envy might be crushed in the bud. Emulation is a dangerous and mistaken principle of constancy. Instead of it I would wish to see the connection of pupils, consisting only of pleasure and generosity. They should learn to love, but not to hate each other. Benevolent actions should not directly be preached to them, they should strictly begin in the heart of the performer. But when actually done, they should receive the most distinguished applause.

Let me be permitted in this place to observe, that the association of a small number of pupils seems the most perfect mode of education. There is surely something unsuitable to the present state of mankind, in the wishing to educate our youth in perfect solitude. Society calls forth a thousand powers both of mind and body, that must otherwise rust in inactivity. And nothing is more clear from experience, than that there is a certain tendency to moral depravation in very large bodies of this kind, to which there has not yet been discovered a sufficient remedy.

If, by the pursuit of principles like these, the powers of the understanding and the heart might be developed in concert; if the pupils were trained at once to knowledge and virtue; if they were enabled to look back upon the period of their education, without regretting one instance of

anxious terror, or capricious severity; if they recollected their tutor with gratitude, and thought of their companions, as of those generous friends whom they would wish for the associates of their life,—in that case, the pains of the preceptor would not be thrown away.

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William Godwin
An Account of The Seminary That Will Be Opened On Monday, The Fourth Day of August, At
Epsom In Surrey
For The Instruction Of Twelve Pupils In The Greek, Latin, French, And English Languages.
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