

**THE CLAIMS OF CLASSICAL
LEARNING EXAMINED AND
REFUTED BY ARGUMENT, AND BY
THE CONFESSIONS OF
SCHOLARS**

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RUMFORD

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BY "RUMFORD."

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PREFACE.

IN the all important concerns of education, the prevailing scheme of study, both here and in Europe, appears to involve a species and a degree of inconsistency wholly unaccountable.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, while Grecian philosophy was in vogue, the reign of error was indeed, beyond measure, more extensive; but it was more consistent—Principle and practice went together—The dogmas of Aristotle passing then for the first principles of science, the empire of authority was universal; and mental subjugation, as it was unfelt, was unsuspected. The attention then paid to ancient language, as the natural avenue to ancient wisdom, was but a part of the general delusion and harmonized with it. In the system as a whole, however erroneous, there was a congruity and a fitness well calculated both to dazzle and deceive; and it did deceive for many a generation. But what is the state of things in our day?—Ancient philosophy is altogether exploded. In no one department of science, physical or metaphysical, political or moral, are the ancients looked up to as suitable guides. Their principles, it is true, were not invariably wrong, and their doctrines often were accidentally right; but their general theories, on all subjects, have long been renounced by common consent, as being either visionary, or inadequate, or ill adapted to the state of the world as we now find it.

Nor is this any disparagement to those who were called to think and act at earlier periods. When the progress of knowledge is recorded, though but imperfectly, each generation begins its career with better helps—it takes its departure from a more advanced point—and as this process has been going on ever since the art of writing was first invented, more especially since the art of printing, the present race of men must possess by many degrees a larger fund of intelligence than their remote ancestors, though nowise superior perhaps by nature. To travel over the ground of ancient learning does really seem then like going over our alphabet at the age of manhood.

The most passionate admirer of antiquity cannot deny that in our day knowledge is incomparably more accurate, more extensive, and what is better still, of a more practical character. Starting as it does from observation and experiment instead of speculation and conjecture, it rests on a more substantial foundation—Hence men deceive themselves much less. What now passes for knowledge, is, in a far greater proportion than formerly, really such. Not that the world is free from doubt and hypothesis, for of these there is yet abundance and always will be. Nor are the minds of men exempt from delusion; for though less frequent, it is in some cases quite as predominant. Of this, the actual state of education is at once the most striking example, and the most efficient cause. What greater infatuation can be imagined than that of retaining the languages as an indispensable branch of education, at a time when every thing they exclusively contain is admitted to have lost its value. Yet at this very day the dialects of Greece and Rome are taught with scarcely less enthusiasm than at the period when they were believed to be the only possible source of information. Classical partialities, for many years expelled our halls of science, still loiter in our schools. Homer and Virgil, Plato and Cicero are still the charm—still the precious rosary, by which every youthful aspirant is taught to count his lessons, and appreciate his mental stock. And worst of all, ancient Prosody, that farce of farces, still wins the prize. Now here, if I mistake not, is a force of delusion unmatched by any thing even of the 16th century—an incongruity which no past age could equal, and no future perhaps ever believe.

From a train of reflections similar to the foregoing, the author of the following pages was long ago persuaded that the dead languages were far from meriting, and far from compensating, the time, the attention, or the expence now bestowed on them. The arguments used in their behalf he was convinced must be fallacious. These impressions, so far from having abated by any thing he has since heard, or seen, or read, have gained new force in all respects.

With a view of bringing the matter into discussion, the greater portion of what is here contained was published last autumn under the form of *Essays*, in the *Boston Centinel*; hoping by that means to draw from those, who seem governed by a contrary persuasion, a lucid, methodical and argumentative exposition of the subject as viewed on their side. But this expectation was not realized. A defence of the reign-

ing system was indeed commenced by two writers in two different papers, but soon abandoned ; though not without an eloquent appeal, on the part of one, to the official guardians of ancient learning, to take up its defence, and rescue it from so awkward a posture—yet nothing more has appeared.*

The object in now publishing the substance of those papers under a new form, with some additions, is to avail of a different path of circulation, and thus give the argument a greater chance of being fully refuted, if it merits such a fate ; or being more read and reflected upon, should it deserve a better.—One chance especially it may have in its present shape, which is that of being handled by our periodical writers ; and this perhaps would be as good a way as any of bringing the matter fairly into debate. The habits, talents, and turn of thought, among this class of writers, render them perfectly *au fait*, on such questions ; and if the case be manageable, they will not wait long for an invitation.

But however well, or however ill, the course of reasoning here pursued may pass the ordeal of public judgment, to apologize for inviting attention to this or any other topic of general interest, would be almost an insult to the spirit of the age. It is our good fortune to live in times, when nothing is held too sacred to be brought to the test of reason ; and truth may be followed in any direction, without stopping to inquire through whose fields it might lead us. If any one perceives, or thinks he perceives, either a latent defect or a pernicious tendency in prevailing habits, customs, or modes of thinking, he is at least justified, perhaps in some measure obligated, to state his argument, and submit the case to the decision of others. I am aware however that there are some prejudices too dear to be abandoned without a sigh ; and persons may be imagined so peculiarly situated that the stronger the argument, the less welcome the doctrine ; yet whoever might attempt to excite alarm at the consequences, would show by that very attempt that he lives at least half a century too late.

Education, considered in all its influences, is perhaps the most important subject, next to religion, that can occupy the human mind ; being in some sort the basis, the substratum of that whole mass of habits, feelings, and opinions, which go to constitute character, as well national as individual. And yet, it is made the subject of mature reflection with very few—though often a casual topic of conversation. It is but too

* The reader may see an extract from this appeal in the Appendix.

common a failing among parents, even intelligent parents, to distrust their own ability to judge of the proper objects of study, especially as regards the languages. Nine out of ten may perhaps be truly said to have no independent opinion of their own, deduced from data and reasonings of their own.—From this cause chiefly, aided however by others, the whole management of school affairs has long been in the hands of certain classes of men, respectable unquestionably, and well informed—but still, men whose partialities have in some measure become fixed by their own early studies, and by subsequent habits—a good portion of whom being also in office under the system, may well be content to keep things as they are.

With regard to the importance of the dead languages, faith has floated long enough on loose unscrutinized assumptions,—those therefore by whose patronage they are upheld may now very reasonably be called upon for a systematic justification of this sort of study, in the manner and extent now practised. If it can be defended, they will rejoice in any opportunity, however presented, for removing the doubts of others—doubts they may be assured much oftener concealed than expressed—At all events, the cause can never suffer for want of champions—there are pens enough in its service, and good will enough.

To me, however, the system appears wholly indefensible ; and I have little doubt of satisfying every attentive reader that at any rate the common grounds of defence will not avail. The chief embarrassment lies in the nature of the subject—wholly incapable of being disposed of briefly, yet too little attractive to sustain attention—at least without other graces than are at my command. But when it is considered what enormous sums of money, to say nothing of the much greater value of time, are constantly and often inconveniently lavished on Greek and Latin, it may be hoped that parents, if no others, will listen with some degree of patience to an attempt to prove (what is seriously believed the truth) that all this may be saved without any disadvantage to their children, nay, with a positive benefit to them.

The reader may be assured, if that will be any comfort to him, that a learned disquisition is not to be aimed at, and for a very good reason, as he may guess ; but so far is it from being needful, the subject is already not a little obscured by the mist of erudition. The *endeavour* will be to disperse the mist, and make the matter intelligible to plain unlettered common sense.

Classical men, it may be feared, will be disappointed in every way—no flowers of rhetoric—no sprigs of classical allusion—and not a single line in compliment to ancient learning—but as to novelty, they will find one kind of it abundant enough—opinions, reasonings and quotations will be of quite another complexion to what they are accustomed. It is not conceded however, that scholars are at all more likely to form a correct judgment on such topics, than any other intelligent men who may choose to investigate for themselves, and draw their own conclusions.—One of the best vouchers for correctness of opinion is freedom from all previous bias, in which respect other men have greatly the advantage—and if the reflecting portion of the community could once be prevailed upon to think really for themselves in these matters, I am inclined to believe that many academic notions, now current, would soon lose their effect.

Indeed, to take things even as we find them, the classical scheme may be said to rest quite as much on fashion as on any settled persuasion of its benefit.—“It is surprising (says Dr. Gilchrist in his book on Etymology) that so few have perceived how destructive to intellect the prevailing system of classical education is; or rather that so few have had courage to avow it.” Now here is pointed out one of the principal causes that has operated to keep these studies in vogue. It is not so much the universality of belief in their efficacy, as the want of sufficient independence, on the part of those who doubt, to declare their real sentiments. It is very apparent that classical learning has long been on the decline in Europe, notwithstanding its far more intimate connexion, in numberless ways, with the government, the church, and in short the whole structure of society, than it has now, or ever has had, in this country. Here, there is certainly no decline; but yet here, as well as there, a considerable portion of those who have gone through the regular course, think by no means highly of it, and this they often confess *under the rose*—the mischief is, they are deterred from a free expression of their thoughts, by the overwhelming influence of established institutions. It is gratifying to observe that in England at least, a more manly tone is of late becoming prevalent, of which the reader will find some specimens, well deserving his perusal, here printed in the appendix. They are taken from periodical works of some celebrity; which being uniformly conducted by scholars of note, it is scholars themselves who speak in the pages referred to—and as the same remark will