

The STUDY of POLITE LITERATURE defended against the  
OBJECTION that it is USELESS; and even PERNICIOUS to  
SOCIETY.

[From M. de ROSENSTEIN'S ORATION delivered before the SWEDISH  
ACADEMY, translated by N. G. AGANDER.]

“FROM the four following sources are derived those arguments, the grounds of which I venture to deny: the examples recorded in history; a comparison between those periods in which polite learning has flourished, and in which it was unknown; the very nature of elegant learning; and the dispositions and conduct of those who are devoted to its pursuits.

“Examples deduced from history I mention first, well persuaded that they have long and powerfully supported the cause of error. There is not any thing, of which mankind have been more ignorant, than of the science of social life. The imperfections incident to every form of government I do not arraign. How indeed could perfection be attained, without mature consideration; and who can expect mature consideration in works produced by the fortuitous course of events, by the tyranny of circumstances? Among the ancient states, Sparta alone could boast a legislation connected in all its parts: yet, by militating against the strongest propensities of human nature, the Spartan laws excited a perpetual conflict, that ended in the destruction of that country. The governments at present subsisting may be aptly compared to Gothic edifices improved by the hand of taste.

“It may be observed, that a prudent extent of territory, a comprehensive experience, and an industrious pursuit of happiness, have contributed more to the public and

private advantage of mankind, than the most admired laws of the ancient legislators. There still, however, subsist so many fundamental defects and errors, so much opposition between different parts of the same system, that no modern form of government can be considered as a just model for imitation. Venice will perhaps be pointed out as an exception; a republic of which the constitution has survived its greatness, and a material change in the sentiments of the people. But what a constitution! Equally unshaken, Oriental despotism has a higher claim to antiquity.

“Nevertheless, history has long been considered as affording examples for the construction of forms of government. Athens, Carthage, and Rome, are objects of enquiry in France, England, and Sweden. Elevating their voice, philosophers have at length ventured to ask, if France be Athens, England Carthage, or Sweden Rome? Is it not, however, often asserted, that after having lost her simplicity, frugality, and poverty, Sparta was no more; that Athens, by encouraging public spectacles, ceased to conquer; instead of a Miltiades, an Aristides, a Themistocles, she had a Menander, a Plato, a Demosthenes? Charmed with the eloquence of Cicero, the poetry of Virgil, and Horace, the Romans supinely neglected their country's freedom. Alarming examples these! alarming, indeed, for governments like these!

But other causes sufficiently account for the destruction of liberty.

“ By the frantic rage of conquest, every small community must fall a victim to its own weakness, every extensive monarchy a prey to its own grandeur. The love of peace will not shield the former from the attacks of an ambitious neighbour; unavoidable necessity compels them to combat, to conquer, or to perish. A political truth this, which will throw some light on the ruins of ancient governments.

“ The Lacedemonians, designed by Lycurgus to be protected by valour, from equality and poverty to derive peace and contentment, to possess independence by ruling only over themselves; these people lost their strength, when, instead of preferring a system of self-defence, they committed hostilities upon others; engaged in war with a superior force, they soon ceased to be independent; their happiness was alike destroyed by the consequences of victory or of adverse fortune. Athens found it impossible to support, undiminished, that vigour of mind, that heroic valour, which on the field of Marathon, and on the shore of Salamis, enabled a handful of men to vanquish armies numerous beyond the experience or the belief of modern times.

“ That the decline and fall of the Roman empire was the inevitable consequence of its extravagant ambition, who can question? But why have not those acute reasoners, who pretend to trace events to their causes, shewn, whence proceeded the destruction of those states, on whose ruin Rome raised her Colossean greatness? Was it luxury and elegant learning which destroyed the Sabines, the citizens of Veji, the Volscians, and the Latins: or did not their own weakness aban-

don their destiny to the chance of war? Imperious Rome herself had, more than once, nearly seen falsified her real, or pretended dreams of eternity.

“ With these events literature had not any, or at most a very slight connection. To elegant occupations Sparta paid little attention; nay, if destitute of poets and orators, Athens would have fallen like Sybaris, Capua, and unlettered Carthage. Had Rome erected her vast monarchy, without subjecting Greece; in all probability Rome would have been little acquainted with polite learning; but, most certainly, her power, like that of Persia and Macedon, must have declined.

“ But should the influence of elegant learning be allowed to have been injurious to ancient states; at present, however, it cannot be considered in that light. This, the history and constitution of modern governments will sufficiently evince.

“ The polite subjects of Lewis XIV. were warriors not less courageous than the ruder Germans and Spaniards, whom they opposed. This monarch, the patron of polite learning, like Augustus, riveted, it is true, the fetters of slavery on the nation: yet, at the same period, amidst the flourishing growth of science and elegant learning, the English fixed on a firm basis, their admirable constitution,

“ How little the destiny of ancient governments ought, at present, to excite our alarm, every reflecting mind will easily perceive. Extent of territory and power are more equally distributed; envy and fear, the centinels of the strong, prove the guardians of the weak: restrained by finance, war is less calculated for conquest, than for de-

defence; knowledge is applied to the advantage of society. Without opposing the moderate claims of the human passions, their excess only is consigned to punishment; the demands of liberty seek an equality in natural, rather than in acquired, privileges; rather private security, than political pre-eminence. An uniformity of conduct will then secure modern governments against all those calamities, which flow not from foreign and external causes. But, perhaps, I have examined, too minutely, an argument which the more intelligent adversaries of literature will not very strenuously defend.

“ To enforce our reasoning, we need not, they will alledge, have recourse to history, nor exhibit instances of extreme danger, to shew the necessity of condemning the effects of elegant learning. It is enough, if mankind be more effeminate, more criminal, than in former times. If, from our own degeneracy, we have reason to expect a progeny still more corrupt than ourselves; is our improvement in knowledge to be considered as advantageous? By giving new play to the affections, have not the pursuits of elegant learning, materially contributed to produce the evils of which we now complain?”

“ Prevented, as I am, by a want of leisure, not by a dread of the weight of my opponent's arguments, from replying at large to objections, on the minds of many very deeply impressed by the deluding colours of eloquence; yet a concise view of the progress of society will evince, that no comparison has been made between the advantages and evils; that, if a change of manners be a calamity,

it is an unavoidable one; and that a mere effect has been preposterously mistaken for a cause.

“ Amidst the variety of human conditions, there is none which can boast advantages, unconnected with disadvantages. These, on the contrary, will seldom be found unalleviated, if we set aside the unnatural situations of despotism on the one hand, and of slavery and oppression on the other. The state of savages, their gradual progress in civilization, I forbear mentioning. It will not be necessary to refute those, who delight in declaiming on the felicity of barbarism, if it be considered with what difficulty savages provide for their sustenance, what ceaseless hostility they exercise against each other, and that languor clouds, and frequently shortens their monotonous lives.

“ Taught to depend no longer for subsistence on the destruction of animals, or on the spontaneous productions of the earth, but obliged to cultivate the ground, mankind fixed on a determinate spot, though not without danger of being expelled by invaders more powerful than themselves. Such a situation the dawn of society presents to our view: but how gloomy is yet the prospect! Turning our eyes from states destroyed in their infancy; from nations, either long since buried in their ruins, or still groaning under oppression, let us, excluding circumstances merely casual, and attending to general causes, contemplate some of those people who have passed through all the several stages from barbarism to refinement.

“ After the means of subsistence are provided, the next desire of man, is for personal liberty. Disdaining the bonds, which prevent mankind from employing their fa-  
culties

culties for the promotion of their happiness, liberty does not desist from her claims, till all unnecessary restraints are removed. Property once secured, produces inequality of circumstances; inequality affording a scope to man's natural propensity to ease, engenders luxury, a subject productive of much contention among philosophers and politicians.

" This natural progress of society, is frequently retarded or accelerated, by accidental causes. These causes exhibit a people, struggling under internal or foreign restraint, regaining lost freedom, again sinking under a superior force, until at length human nature becomes impatient of bondage, and every thing recovers its stated course. Amidst these different situations, national manners, depending on the different degrees of civilization, will undergo material changes. At first, rude and barbarous, then simple and unpolished, afterwards enlightened, lastly arriving at the highest pitch of politeness, mankind become prudent in their conduct, delicate in their conversation, and refined in their sentiments.

" From this ordinary progress, there will, however, be deviations. A people exerting all their force to defend or enlarge their territory, display actions wonderful, laudable, and frequently honoured with the name of heroism. But this enthusiasm soon subsides. At other times happy or untoward circumstances have an extraordinary effect. To such a degree of corruption the morals of men may arrive, the human mind may become so debased and effeminate, so willing to submit to the first yoke which shall be imposed, as to allow despotism to annihilate every idea of public virtue.

" Hence it appears, that the changes, which take place in society, are of two kinds: either proceeding from accidental causes, or inevitably derived from the very nature of civil communities.

" If the former be productive of greater inconveniences than advantages, they may properly be arraigned as requiring redress. The latter, no wise man will censure, nor attempt to place barriers against the uniform and irresistible course of nature. Those countries which possess the largest share of freedom and security, the sage will consider as the most happy; as the least imperfect that system of laws, which imposes the smallest constraint upon the human passions. Without dwelling on defects and inconveniences which flow from the very source of virtue, he is persuaded, that, in all ages mankind, bearing a strong resemblance to each other, are ever actuated by the same motives: ambition, envy, and self-interest. The predominance of certain virtues or vices, occasions a diversity of manners. The most estimable virtues, however, result from that state of society, in which mankind have obtained the valuable right of seeking happiness without injuring each other, and have secured this important right by established laws.

" These observations are sufficient to disprove the answer to the censure, which has been thrown on modern times and modern manners.

" If we have clearer ideas of the rights of human nature, of the origin and aim of society; if already influencing the conduct of sovereigns, and the laws of nations, these ideas procure a more tranquil enjoyment of advantages natural or acquired: surely we have no reason to look back with an eye of envy

on former times. If more humane and reasonable, more benevolent and social, our manners flow from the natural progress of civil society: then is every complaint against them as unfounded as it is insignificant. We are evidently, therefore, advanced to that degree of civilization, at which it was expedient that we should arrive; nor could its attendant inconveniences be removed, without introducing still greater evils. How little the ancient states are calculated to become examples to the modern, has already been demonstrated.

“ Having thus endeavoured to answer objections, by which this subject has been obscured, I may now be permitted to investigate the nature of polite literature, and its peculiar influence upon society. This, perhaps, ought to have been my first object. But prejudice, opposed by truth, resembles a citadel, assaulted by a superior force: when its outworks, the principal strength are once broken down, its entire destruction is easily accomplished.

“ The first idea, suggested by the *Belles Lettres*, demonstrates them to be rather the consequence than the cause of the manners of mankind. By civil society, the mind must be prepared to receive their impressions. Inachus, Cecrops, and Danaus, preceded Amphion, Linus, and Orpheus, who also, it is said, spoke only to the ear. Before Homer could address the fancy, what further progress must not society have made! Elegant learning depends on the degree of civilization, no less for its gradual advancement, than for its first rise. Though since the revival of letters, the valuable remains of the ancients engage the attention of modern nations, their taste is formed essentially by internal causes. The

character of the people, for whom an author writes, must be studied by him, if he wishes to seize the heart. The prevailing sentiments of a nation have a considerable influence upon individuals. Hence the connexions observed between the genius of a people and their taste. That every material change in the civilization, manners, and sentiments of mankind, has had a proportionate influence on their taste and literature, I shall endeavour to evince. Uncommon flights of genius must, however, be excepted, which, soaring beyond the bounds of the present age, contribute to form the taste of posterity.

“ The political causes which principally influence the manners of a nation, create and perfect the *Belles Lettres*; these, in their turn, are not destitute of effects, for in the moral world, effects re-act upon their causes. Before the question be examined whether the influence of elegant learning be useful or injurious, the nature of this influence ought to be ascertained.

“ Of some few, the entire attention is devoted to polite learning: In others, by employing those vacant hours which can be spared from business or trivial pursuits, polite literature becomes a rich source of innocent pleasure, opens a large field for imagination, quickens sensibility, extends the knowledge of human nature, refines the sentiments, destroys grosser attachments, and gives birth to a more delicate choice of amusements, to more exquisite recreations, to a more enlightened intercourse. Inaccessible to all but men of science, many truths have, by the help of elegant learning, been generally diffused; and from the superiority of the objects of its enquiry, the human understanding has increased  
its

in penetration. And can it be imagined, that such effects would be injurious? No, it is answered, not so much, on a superficial survey, as they will appear on a more accurate inspection. The pleasures of imagination are often indulged to an immoderate degree? by refinement, conversation becomes less sincere: the Belles Lettres, administering amusements which lead to vices, and often exercised on criminal subjects, prove the causes of effeminacy, and the corruptors of manners.

“ There is nothing, however excellent and laudable it may be, that is not subject to inconvenience, and liable to abuse. Without entering upon a new defence of our present political and moral situation, I shall content myself with referring to what has already been said respecting the necessity of that situation. When we reflect, that the Belles Lettres cannot flourish except amongst a people who have arrived at a certain degree of ease and opulence, the surest mode of ascertaining whether they are useful or pernicious, will be to compare two nations placed on the same degree in the scale of civilization, one of which cultivates the polite arts, and the other neglects them entirely. Polite literature and the sciences mutually assist each other. It is difficult to arrive at the latter, without passing through the former: it would be madness to think of attaining the sciences, while the study of the Belles Lettres was proscribed. It is physically impossible, that the human mind should ex-patiate in the vast field of intellectual exertion, while so absurd a barrier is opposed to our progress. The only difference between science and the polite arts is this, that the first

acts more upon the understanding, and the latter have a greater influence on manners and the conduct of life.

“ Let us then imagine to ourselves, as I have already observed two nations enjoying an equal portion of security and welfare; in each of these nations will exist the same degree of sensuality and luxury, and thence in each nation will arise the same defects and the same vices.

“ But if one of these nations was destitute of elegant learning, unsusceptible of any refined pleasure, and solely addicted to sensual enjoyments, it would soon become the victim of indolence, cowardice, and effeminacy. Such has been the fate of those nations, which, without knowledge, have obtained power. Of this the Persians, Macedonians, and Turks, are sufficient examples. A similar destiny will be experienced by those people who, without attending to the cultivation of their minds, enjoy merely the conveniences of life. The European colonies are proofs of this assertion.

“ On the contrary, in another nation, equally powerful and prosperous, the culture of elegant learning will produce congenial sentiments of patriotism. Independently of the diffusion of useful knowledge, polite literature excites and cherishes moral feelings, which by restraining sensual pleasures within proper limits, excite and encourage men of talents, by the hopes of immortal fame. This is a motive, which, on the first repose of Rome from the yoke of despotism, animated the genius of Tacitus and Pliny; and which, preserving for a time the ancient grandeur of the empire, rendered less pre-

precipitate the fall of the Roman world. This argument will obtain additional force, by considering European nations, which, with forms of government nearly similar, possess different degrees of knowledge.

“ It remains, that I should mention those faults which have been objected to the votaries of taste; faults scarcely deserving notice, when urged as serious reproaches.

“ The charms of poetry, it is alleged have been prostituted in fulsome flattery upon the most unworthy monarchs. But we certainly ought not to charge poetry with its abuse. Was the sovereign, who admired and rewarded flattery, ever destitute of sycophants? To the princes who have despised or neglected literature, flatterers have not been wanting, not even to Caligula, who profanely wished to destroy the works of Virgil. Lewis the XIV. has perhaps been too highly praised: but Lewis, really great, was instigated by praise itself to noble actions. In the same age, Butler and Dryden were allowed to languish in poverty, by Charles the II. while he supported ministers who encouraged his effeminate indolence, and courtiers who entertained his voluptuous levity. Let us view mankind as they are. Few form their own characters: those of the generality arise from circumstances. Between flattery and elegant learning there is no close connection: on the contrary, the first and most natural effect of the Belles Lettres, is to elevate the mind. But when found to be the road to preferment, adulation will alike be pursued by the indigent, the ambitious, the scholar, the courtier, and the warrior. In such a situation, men of letters deserve our utmost pity, as the monu-

ments of their genius perpetuate their dishonour. Happy the author who can safely utter truth, and who is sufficiently spirited to exercise that valuable privilege.

“ The most enraptured votaries of learning, who are blessed with a fruitful and ardent imagination, are unqualified, it is affirmed, for those duties of life which require reflection: their behaviour is generally singular, and their restless mind is the sport of unruly passions.

“ But of this remark, liable to so many exceptions, what is the inference?

“ It proves only, that mankind should follow the impulse and direction of nature. If they feel a strong incitement to elegant learning, why should they resist its pleasing influence? In obeying the dictates of nature, they are most likely to be useful to themselves and to society; and the fire of genius, instead of being injurious, will animate them to the pursuit of knowledge and virtue.

“ Far, therefore, from being condemned, the culture of elegant learning ought to be highly encouraged. The leisure which they have devoted to the Belles Lettres, will not be regretted by those who regard them merely as an amusement; they will hence learn to arrange their thoughts, to give dignity to the passions. Capable of procuring for themselves a sublime and heart-felt satisfaction, they will despise the noisy pleasures which captivate the croud. Those who feel themselves impelled to devote their principal attention to polite learning, will not fail of an adequate reward.

“ If the Belles Lettres afford a necessary aid to science; if they polish the manners, mitigate or diminish the pernicious effects of pro-

sperty;

ferity; if they communicate pleasures frugal and profitable; if they brighten the gloom of solitude, and comfort the heart in the hour of affliction; if, by instilling the love of virtue, they elevate the mind to patriotic sentiments: then must their votaries not be accounted useless members of society. Then

may they condemn the railings of ignorance and prejudice, and expect the esteem of every liberal mind. From an enlightened government they have a right to protection: from posterity they may promise themselves that fame which they deserve."

MISCELLANEOUS REMARKS ON EPIC POETRY, in general.

[From TINDAL'S JUVENILE EXCURSIONS IN LITERATURE and CRITICISM.]

**N**O human invention appears more perfect or admirable than the construction of an Epic form. This is most strikingly evident, if we consider such a production, independently of all poetical ornament, merely as a portion of history; the main subject of which is presented to our view in its full amplitude, while the events, anterior and subsequent, but so connected as to render them more or less interesting, are announced in the summary mode of episodic digression. Although, for many and obvious reasons, such a plan could never be adopted in general history, it has proved, in numerous instances, the most perfect mode of treating the events of any remarkable period that the art of man could devise. So excellent, indeed, is it, that in an epic poem founded on real but remote events, we, always, with some reluctance, allow to the requisite poetical ornaments the ungrateful prerogative of detracting from truth.

"The drama seems indebted to the epic for its entire structure. Aristotle, indeed, tells us tragedy

was originally derived from Dithyrambic song. It would be strange presumption to differ from Aristotle; but may we not venture to suspect, that whatever the drama may, in other respects, owe to the ancient Dithyrambic, it borrowed its form and structure, entirely, from the poems of Homer; which were anterior to, and, in fact, seem the parents of all other poetry. The drama is, indeed, the epic in miniature, though, in a manner realized by action. Aristotle contends, also, for its superior excellence to the epic. But in what, except in actual representation, does this superior excellence consist? "It might adopt its metre," he tells us: but it were, perhaps, better it did not. "It admits music, and decoration." After distinguishing properly, as he does in the beginning of this chapter, between real and popular excellence, it is rather wonderful he should mention these as turning the scale in favour of the drama: for, although they may serve to heighten illusion, and, thus, give a popular superiority, they are, certainly, no more