XVII

OUR COLLEGES BEFORE THE COUNTRY

[1884]

THERE is no subject which is to-day so submerged in cant and humbug as education. Both primary and secondary education are suffering from this cause, but in different ways. Primary education is afflicted by the cant and humbug of progress and innovation, and secondary education is afflicted by the cant and humbug of conservatism and toryism. The former affliction is less grievous than the latter, because it pertains to life — may proceed from an excess of vitality; the latter pertains to death and leads down to it.

It is not my present intention to discuss primary education, but it belongs to my subject to notice one fact in the relation of secondary to primary education. There is a notion prevalent in college circles that the colleges have an important public duty to perform in marking out the line of study for the preparatory schools, and in keeping them up to their duty. It seems to me that this is a mischievous notion. The high-schools and academies of the country are doing their duty far better than the colleges are doing theirs. The teachers in the schools have as high a standard of duty as the teachers in the colleges, and the former have more care and zeal to devise and adopt good methods than the latter. Methods of instruction are yet employed in college which have long been discarded in the schools, and, if either has anything to learn from the other, it is the colleges which need instruc-

tion from the schools. The colleges, by their requirements, do exercise a certain control over the curriculum of the schools. It is an open question whether this control is generally beneficial to the education of the young men of the country. If the colleges have prescribed courses of study, and if the schools have to follow a prescribed course of study leading up to it, then a few gentlemen with strong prejudices and limited experience of life obtain power to set up a canon of what things may be taught and learned in the country. That such a power has been possessed and used, that it still remains to a great extent unbroken, and that it is purely mischievous, I take to be facts beyond contradiction. In no civilized country is mandarinism in education so strong as in the United States. Its stronghold is in the colleges, and they use such control as they possess to establish it in the schools. One great gain of the reform which is now needed in the colleges would be that they would confine themselves to their own functions and leave the academies and high-schools to follow their own legitimate development.

I ought not to speak as if there had been no improvement in American colleges within a generation. It is well known that, both by founding new institutions and reforming old ones, great improvements have been made. A great college has a life of its own. It grows by its own vital powers and pushes on even the most timid or reactionary of its *personnel*. Probably bigotry and stupidity could kill it in time. One knows of ancient seats of learning which have met that fate. But it does not come all at once. Still, I believe that if the question whether the college course had been valuable, had been raised in a class of graduates twenty or fifty years ago, more would have said that they looked back upon it as a grand advantage than would say so now.

It is affirmed, and from such evidence as has come to my knowledge I believe it to be true, that the youth of the country do not care for a university education as the youth of former generations did. They consider that a high-school education is education enough. They do not look upon the colleges as offering anything of high and specific value which it is worth four years' time and a large expenditure of capital to get. Of course there has always been a large class of people who despised a culture which they never understood. The present temper of the youth and their parents is, as I understand it, a very different thing. They look upon the colleges as the gate of admission to a caste of people who are technically "educated" and "cultivated," who have a kind of free-masonry of culture amongst themselves, but who are not educated or cultivated, if we take those words in any liberal and rational sense, any better than large masses of people who are not college graduates, and so not members of the gild of the learned. Facts are indisputable that free and generous familiarity with the best thought and knowledge of the time, as well as intellectual power, activity, and elasticity, are displayed by men who have never visited a university, but have devoted time judiciously to intellectual pursuits. Therefore a notion has found place that college training only confers artificial accomplishments which serve to mark the members of the learned caste. Once it was thought that the only learning fit for a gentleman was heraldry, and that his only accomplishments should be those of arms, music, and gallantry. A flunkey once said that a certain woman could not be a lady: she played the piano so well that she must have been educated for a governess. In the old gilds a man could only become a master by producing a very costly and useless master-

piece. A belle in Siam lets her finger-nails grow inches long, so that she cannot even dress herself, and everyone who sees her knows that she is helpless and elegant. All these instances, heterogeneous as they are, have elements in common with each other and with the traditional work of our colleges. They present the notion that what is useful is vulgar, that useless accomplishments define a closed rank of superior persons, and that entrance into that rank should be made difficult. However, we live in a day and a country where these notions have only a feeble footing. Our people are likely to turn away with a smile and go on to things which are of use and importance, and no elegance of rhetoric and poetry, devising subtle and far-fetched explanations of the real utility of classical accomplishments, will avail to hold them. Such I take to be the significance of the fact that the youth do not appreciate a college education or feel an eager desire for it as their fathers did. I have heard it argued that it is a great misfortune that the boys should be contented with a high-school education and should not care to go to college; also that something should be done to persuade them to seek a college education. I do not so argue. A college or school ought to stand on its own footing as a blessing to anybody who can get its advantages, and its advantages ought to be so obvious and specific that they should advertise themselves. If a college does not offer such advantages that anyone who can may gladly seize them, then the young men may better not enter it. If special inducements are necessary to persuade men to go to college, then the condemnation of the college is pronounced. It has no reason to exist.

It is no doubt true that a classical education once gave a man a positive and measurable advantage in the

career which he might choose in life. At a time when the sciences which teach us to know the world in which we live were still in their infancy; when the studies by which the mind is trained to high, strict, and fearless thinking were as yet undeveloped; when history was still only a record of curious and entertaining incidents in war and diplomacy; when modern civil institutions were yet in many respects below the standard of the ancients, and still on the same military basis; when no notion of law had yet found footing in the conception of society; — at such a time no doubt study of classical types and models was valuable; ideas were obtained from an old treasure-house which could not have been obtained from the experience of actual life; literary culture was the only possible discipline; grammar stood first as a training in thought and expression; formal logic was a practical tool; perhaps even introspective metaphysics was not entirely a scholastic and dialectic exercise. In those times a young man who possessed a classical education, with a few touches of metaphysics and theology to finish it off, was put on a true superiority to his uneducated contemporaries as regarded his stock of ideas, his powers of expression, his horizon of knowledge, and the general liberality of his attitude towards life. He felt this his whole life long. It made him earnestly grateful to the institution which had educated him. Every young man who grew up saw distinctly the superior advantages which a college man possessed, and, if he felt at all fit for it, was eager to win the same advantage. There certainly never has been, in the United States, any appreciation of the rose-water arguments about "culture" which are now put forward in defense of classical training. We, when we were boys, sought classical training because it was *the* training which then put the key of life in our

hands, and because we saw positive and specific advantages which we could obtain by it.

At the present time all is altered, and the changes which have come about have made necessary a great change in the character of our colleges, in their courses of study, and in their whole attitude towards the public. I do not say that they need to come into direct and close relations with the life of the nation to-day: I say that they must take heed to themselves lest they fall out of that intimate relation to the life of the nation in which they once stood, and out of which they have no importance or value at all. A college which is a refuge for mere academicians, threshing over the straw of a dead learning, is no better than a monastery. Men who believe that they can meet the great interests of mankind which to-day demand satisfaction, by a complacent reference to what satisfied them when they were young, are simply building for themselves a fool's paradise.

It must be said here that college officers are, for many reasons, unfit for college management. They are exposed to all the pitfalls of every pedagogue. They have to guard themselves against the vices of dogmatism, pedantry, hatred of contradiction, conceit, and love of authority. They, of course, come each to love his own pursuit beyond anything else on earth. Each thinks that a man who is ignorant of *his* specialty is a barbarian. As a man goes on in life under this discipline he becomes more self-satisfied and egotistical. He has little contact with active life; gets few knocks; is rarely forced into a fight or into a problem of diplomacy; gets to hate care or interruption, and loves routine. Men of this type, of course, are timid, and even those traits which are most admirable in the teacher become vices in the executive officer. Such men are always over-fond of *a*

priori reasoning and fall helpless the moment they have to face a practical undertaking. They have the whole philosophy of heaven and earth reduced, measured out, and done up in powders, to be prescribed at need. They know just what ought to be studied, in what amount and succession of doses. That is to say, they are prepared to do any amount of mischief at a juncture when the broadest statesmanship is needed to guide the development of a great institution. Certainly the notion that any body of men can now regulate the studies of youth by what was good for themselves twenty, forty, or sixty years ago is one which is calculated to ruin any institution which they control. It is always a hard test of the stuff men are made of when they are asked to admit that a subject of which they have had control would profit by being taken out of their control and intrusted to liberty.

On the other hand, the system of heterogeneous and nondescript electives, jumbled together without coordination of any kind, and offered to the choice of lazy youth, can never command the confidence of sober teachers. A university ought to teach everything which anybody wants to know. Such is the old idea of a university — a universe of letters. It ought to give complete liberty in the choice of a *line* or *department* of study, but it ought to prescribe rigidly what studies must be pursued in the chosen department by anyone who wants its degree. A Yale diploma ought not to mean that a man knows everything, for that would be absurd; nor that he knows "something about the general principles" of all those things which "every educated man ought to know," for this is a formula for superficiality and false pretence. It ought to mean that he has acquired knowledge in some one line of study, suffi-

cient to entitle him to be enrolled amongst the graduates of the institution, and the college ought to define strictly the kind and quantity of attainment which it considers sufficient, in that line or department, to earn its degree.

Now, however, the advocates of the old classical culture, ignoring or ignorant of all the change which has come over human knowledge and philosophy within fifty years, come forward to affirm that that culture still is the best possible training for our young men and the proper basis for the work of our colleges. How do they know it? How can anybody say that one thing or another is just what is needed for education? Can we not break down this false and stupid notion that it is the duty of a university, not to teach whatever anyone wants to know, but to prescribe to everybody what he ought to want to know? Some years ago, at a school meeting in one of our cities, a gentleman made an argument against the classics. A distinguished clergyman asked him across the room whether he had ever studied the classics. He replied that he had not. "I thought not," replied the clergyman, as he sat down. He was thought to have won a great victory, but he had not. His opponent should have asked him whether he had ever studied anything else. Where is the man who has studied beyond the range of the classical culture who retains his reverence for that culture as superior to all other for the basis of education? No doubt a man of classical training often looks back with pleasure and gratitude to his own education and feels that it has been of value to him; but when he draws an inference, either that no other course of discipline would have been worth more to himself, or that no other discipline can be generally more useful as a basis of education, he forms a judg-

ment on a comparison one branch of which is to him unknown.

I am not in the same position on this question as that held by certain other writers of the day. I may say that I profited fairly by a classical education. I believe that I am in a position to form a judgment as to how much is truth and how much is humbug in the rhapsodies about the classics to which we are treated. The historical sciences and language will always have great value for certain classes of scholars. Clergymen will always need the ancient languages as a part of their professional training. Teachers in certain departments will always need them. No professor of modern languages could be considered equipped for his work if he were unacquainted with Greek and Latin. Philologists and special students in the science of language contribute in a high degree and in an indispensable manner to the stock of our knowledge. Literary men and some kinds of journalists, classes who are sure in the future to seek a more special and detailed training than they have enjoyed in the past, will find utility in classical study. All these classes need, not less Greek and Latin than hitherto, but more. One evil result of trying to force the classics on everybody is that those for whom the classics have value cannot get as much of them as they need. Of modern languages, two at least are to-day indispensable to an educated man. As nations come nearer to each other, and as their literatures grow richer and richer, the need of being able to step over the barrier of language becomes greater. It is easy for anyone who watches the course of things to see how, from one decade to another, the necessity of learning the modern languages makes itself more distinctly felt. Those languages were formerly accomplishments. Now they are necessities

for anyone who intends to pursue literary or scientific work, or even practical work in many departments. Hence language will always enter into the scope of education, especially in its elementary stages. Latin has especial utility and advantage. If one wanted to learn three or four modern languages, it might pay him to learn Latin first, and Latin will always have value for an introduction to the ancient classical world. Greek is a rich and valuable accomplishment to any man of literary or philological tastes, or to an orator or public debater, or to anyone who needs the art of interpretation. I know of no study which will in general develop gifts of expression, or chasten literary style, like the study of Greek. That language more than any other teaches the delicate power of turns in the phrase, of the collocation of words, of emphasis, of subtle shading in synonyms and adjectives. Then, too, surely no student of politics and political economy can pass over the subject-matter of Aristotle, or Demosthenes and the orators, nor the life and polity of the Greek State.

When, however, all this is admitted in regard to the uses of a classical training, what does it prove in regard to the claims of the classics to be made the basis of all higher education or the toll which everyone must pay before he can be admitted to the gild of the learned? Nothing at all. I have known splendid Greek scholars who could not construct a clear and intelligible argument of six sentences. They always became entangled in subtleties of phrase and super-refinement of words. I have known other great Greek scholars who wrote an English which was so dull that scarcely anyone could read it. On the other hand, there are men whose names are household words wherever the English language is spoken because they can say what they mean in clear,

direct, and limpid English, although they have never had any classical culture at all. I have known whole classes to graduate at our colleges who had never read a line of Aristotle, and who had not a single correct notion about the life and polity of the Greeks. Men graduate now all the time who know nothing of Greek history and polity but the fragments which they pick out of the notes on the authors which they read. It is grotesque to talk about the recondite charms and graces of classical culture when one knows what it amounts to for all but here and there one. It is a rare thing for a man to graduate who has read Grote or Curtius, although he has studied Greek for five or six years. Anyone who reads no Greek and never goes to college, but reads Grote or Curtius, knows far more of Greek life, polity, and culture than any but the most exceptional college graduate. I do not believe that this was formerly true. It appears that faithful students in former times used such means as then existed for becoming familiar with classical life and history far more diligently than is now customary. Classical studies, having sunk to a perfunctory character, now stand in the way of faithful study of anything.

I go further, and if the classics are still proposed as the stem of a liberal education, to be imposed upon every student who seeks a university training, I argue that classical culture has distinct and mischievous limitations. The same may no doubt be said of any other special culture, and whenever any other culture is put forward as possessing some exclusive or paramount value, it will be in order to show that fact. I do not doubt that I gained great profit from a classical training. Part of the profit I was conscious of. I think it very likely that I won other profit of which I was unconscious. I know that it cost me years of discipline to overcome the limita-

tions of the classical training and to emancipate my mind from the limited range of processes in which it had been trained. For the last ten years I have taught political economy to young men of twenty-one years or thereabouts who had been prepared for me by training in a curriculum based on classics. They have acquired certain facilities. They have a facility in "recitation" which is not always produced by familiarity with the subject. The art of recitation is an art all by itself. Very often it is all a man has won from his college training. Sometimes it consists in beating out a little very thin, so as to make it go a great way; sometimes it consists in "going on one's general information," and profiting to the utmost by any hint in the question; sometimes it consists in talking rapidly about something else than the question. Some men never can come to a point, but soar in lofty circles around and over the point, showing that they have seen it from a distance; others present rags and tags of ideas and phrases, showing that they have read the text and that here and there a word has stuck in the memory without sequence or relation. The habit of reading classics with a "pony" for years has produced these results. Many of these men must be regarded with pity because their mental powers have been miseducated for years, and when they try to acquire something, to make it their own, to turn it into a concise and correct statement and utter it again, they cannot do it. They have only acquired some tricks of speech and memory.

The case of men who have studied honestly, but who have been educated almost exclusively on grammar, is different. No doubt they have gained a great deal, but I find that they hardly ever know what a "law" is in the scientific sense of the word. They think that

it is like a rule in grammar, and they are quite prepared to find it followed by a list of exceptions. They very often lack vigor and force in thinking. They either accept authority too submissively, if the notion which is presented does not clash with any notions they had received before, or if they argue, they do so on points of dialectical ingenuity. They do not join issue closely and directly, and things do not fall into order and range in their minds. They seem to be quite contented to take things and hold them in a jumble. It is rare to find one who has scholarship enough to look up a historical or biographical reference. It is generally assumed by them that if "no lesson has been given out" they have nothing to do. One of the most peculiar notions is that a "lecture" has no such importance as a "recitation"; that to cut the former is of no consequence, but that to cut the latter is serious. In short, the habits and traditions in which men have been trained when they reach senior year in college are such that they are yet boys in responsibility, and, although they are very manly and independent in many respects, they are dependent and unmanly in their methods of study, in their conceptions of duty, in their scholarship, and in their code of conduct in all that effects the institution. It has been claimed for the classics that they give guidance for conduct. This is, to me, the most amazing claim of all, for, in my experience and observation, the most marked fact about classical culture is that it gives no guidance in conduct at all.

In contrast with what I have stated, it is most important to notice that, in every class, men distinguish themselves in political economy who have been very poor scholars in the classics and have lost whatever mental drill a classical training might have given.

I shall be asked whether I attribute the facts which I have mentioned about the mental habits of students to the study of the classics. Evidently many of them are attributable to a system of school discipline continued until a too advanced age, and to a puerile system of discipline. Others are due to a text-book and recitation-with-marks system which breeds into a man unscholarly ideas and methods. But I affirm from my own experience and observation that the most serious of the mental faults and bad intellectual habits which I have described are caused by a training which is essentially literary, grammatical, and metaphysical. No doubt it is true that a large fraction of the men will shirk work; that they are slovenly in all their mental habits; that they will be as idle as they dare; that they seize gladly upon a chance to blame somebody else or "the system" for their own shortcomings. These facts, however, belong only to the imperfection of all things earthly. They are true; but if they are put forward as an excuse for routine and neglect on the part of university authorities, then those authorities simply lower themselves to the level of the bad students. A rigid discipline in prescribed tasks, with especial care for the dull scholars, is in place for youth up to a certain age, but in any good system of education the point must be judiciously chosen at which this system shall yield to a system of individual responsibility. The point at which this change should be made is certainly some years before the point at which young men become men by the laws of their country. That more responsibility would bring out more character is beyond question. The present method of prolonging tutelage and inculcating character by big doses of "moral science" is certainly a failure. I maintain that it is an impertinence for any authority whatever to withhold

from young men twenty years of age anything which they desire to learn, or to impose upon them anything whatever which the authority in question thinks they ought to know.

The tendency of classical studies is to exalt authority, and to inculcate reverence for what is written rather than for what is true. Men educated on classics are apt to be caught by the literary form, if it is attractive. They are fond of paradoxes, and will entertain two contradictory ideas, if only each come in a striking literary dress. They think that they prove something when they quote somebody who has once said it. If anyone wants to keep out "new ideas," he does well to cling to classical studies. They are the greatest barrier to new ideas and the chief bulwark of modern obscurantism. The new sciences have produced in their votaries an unquenchable thirst and affection for what is *true* in fact, word, character, and motive. They have taught us to appreciate and weigh evidence and to deal honestly with it. Here a strong contrast with classical training has been developed, not because classical training led men to be false, but because the scientific love of truth is something new and intense. Men of classical training rarely develop the power to go through from beginning to end of a course of reasoning on a straight line. They go on until they see that they are coming out at a result which they do not like. Then they make a bend and aim for a result which they do like, not regarding the broken continuity, or smoothing it over as carefully as possible. Classical training, in the world of to-day, gives a man a limited horizon. There is far more beyond it than within it. He is taught to believe that he has sounded the depths of human knowledge when he knows nothing about its range or amount. If anyone wants to find prime speci-

mens of the Philistinism which Matthew Arnold hates, he should seek them among the votaries of the culture which Matthew Arnold loves. The popular acuteness long ago perceived this, and the vile doctrines of anti-culture have sprung up and grown just in proportion as culture has come to have an artificial and technical definition, as something foreign to living interests.

An American college ought to be the seat of all the learning which would be of value to an American man in the American life of to-day. It ought to offer that training which would draw out and discipline the mental powers which are to-day useful. It ought to offer to its pupils an opportunity of becoming acquainted with all which is, or is coming to be, in the great world of thought, and it ought to offer such opportunities that those who profited by them faithfully would be highly trained men, drilled and disciplined for any of the tasks of life. If a college were such a place as this, its usefulness would be recognized at once. Every young man in the country would desire, if possible, to enjoy its advantages, because he would feel that, if he could get a college education, he would be as it were lifted upon a higher plane for all the work of his subsequent life, no matter what career he might choose. His ambition would have won a new footing. In the competition of life he would have won new skill and new weapons. No college can possibly take any such place if it "clings to the classics." In face of the facts it is ludicrous to talk about maintaining the old classical culture. We might as well talk of wearing armor or studying alchemy. During the last fifty years all the old sciences have been reconstructed and a score of new ones have been born. Shall a man be educated now at our highest seats of learning and not become acquainted with these facts and doctrines

which are revolutionizing the world of knowledge? Shall he only be allowed a bit here and a fragment there, or spend his best years in pursuits which end in themselves? In every journal or conversation, and in many sermons, topics are treated which belong to the substance of modern thinking. Shall the colleges ignore these topics, or only refer to them in order to preach them down?

History does not any longer mean what it meant twenty years ago. As a disciplinary pursuit it has changed entirely from any exercise of memory to an analysis and investigation of relations and sequences. Constitutional history has grown into a great branch of study of the highest importance to the student of law, political science, jurisprudence, and sociology. It has totally altered the point of view and mode of conceiving of those subjects since the days when the study of them began with the classical authors. The years spent on Greek grammar and literature would be priceless to the whole mass of our youth if they could be spent on this study. Sociology is still in its infancy. Only its most elementary notions are, as yet, available for purposes of education. It is sure to grow into a great science, and one of the first in rank as regards utility to the human race. It is plain that progress in other directions is producing problems in society which we cannot meet because our social science is not proportionately advanced. Biology is a science which is still young and new, but, with its affiliated sciences, it holds the key to a number of our most important problems and to a new philosophy destined to supersede the rubbish of the schools. Physics in all its subdivisions, dynamics, anthropology, archæology, and a host of other sciences, with new developments in mathematics, offer just the

stimulus which is proper and necessary to draw out youthful energies and to awaken youthful enthusiasm. The studies which I have mentioned and others are ready at our hand to-day to give our young men intellectual training and high scholarship and to carry them on to heights of enjoyment and useful activity of which they have no conception. In the mean time they are studying Latin and Greek, and the college authorities are boasting that they cling to the old curriculum and to classical culture.

Our colleges cannot maintain themselves in any such position before the country. They must have the best possible learning, and they must impart it freely. They cannot do this if they "run themselves" or live on their reputation. There is nothing else which now calls for such high statesmanship as the guidance of our old colleges into the new duties and functions which they ought to fulfill. It is a task which calls for great sagacity and good judgment, but above all, for constant study and care. There is here one remarkable consideration by way of encouragement. A great university can be subjected to experiments without any harm at all. It is a great mistake to think that an experiment, if it fails, will leave permanent evils behind. It will not do so. Every academic year stands by itself. Every year it is possible to begin anew, adopting a new plan or recurring to an old one, and no harm at all is done. No one proposes to do away with the study of the classics. For those who desire to pursue that study we desire far fuller opportunities than now exist. The assault is aimed entirely at the pre-eminent and privileged position which is claimed for the classics. We desire that the universities should offer equal chances for a liberal education on the basis of any of the other great lines of study. If

it should prove, upon experiment, that men educated in other sciences could not hold their own in life in competition with the classically educated, there would undoubtedly be a revival of classical study and a return to it by those who were seeking an education.