PARLEZ VOUS FRANCAIS?

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The studies of youth, and, indeed, of all the life of man, have more than one object. It would be a sufficient warrant for hours of daily reading and methodical observation should we think only of the high pleasure such labor brings. But long before such pleasure is thought of by the pupil or the instructor, books are placed before the mind from a sense of the absolute utility of reading and writing and arithmetic. To this most general and obvious reason for school days must be added one more immense reason for this long sojourn among the languages and the sciences—the mental powers which result from such sojourn. Education, as a word, involves this idea, for it implies neither pleasure nor stores of information, but a developing of the mental germs

and tendencies. The mind is created full of tendencies or aptitudes, and under the influence of daily use these tendencies develope into great forces. The soul of the Indian girl contains a tendency toward a love of the beautiful. She will prefer a wild flower to a stone or a stick, and will enjoy a local love song to quite a high degree. This aptitude in the natural wild girl can be enlarged in successive generations until we have, instead of this Indian maid, a De Stael, or a Charlotte Bronte, or a Mrs. Browning. By this process of enlarging by use, a muttering red man becomes a Cicero or a Tacitus, or a flowing writer or an exquisite artist. In pursuing, for thousands of years, this work of evoking mental forces, two inquiries have attended the advancing race—what studies do most strengthen the mind? and what kind of information is of most absolute value? It is perfectly safe to say that no answer has yet come to these questions. It is

perhaps equally safe to say that none ever will come, it being probably true that there are many studies of equal merit, just as there are thousands of landscapes of equal sweetness, and thousands of faces and forms of equal beauty.

For many centuries it has been assumed, that the study of the dead languages, that is, the dead great languages—Latin and Greek, and of the higher mathematics, is the labor which gives best results, the exercise which turns a plowboy into an orator or a statesman or a philosopher. College courses have been run amid these three shapes of toil and information, and it came to pass long ago, that a mind not reared upon this strong food was deemed still an infant, having known only the weakness that comes from a diet of diluted milk. That power of prejudice, the power of what has long been, over the frail form of what might be, which we see in old medicine, or old relig-

ion, or old politics, re-appears in old education, and a scholar or a thinker without the help of Latin and Greek was as impossible as a state without a king, or a salvation without a clergyman. The feeling in favor of the classic course has not been all a prejudice, for that was and is a noble course of mental progress, but it was a prejudice so far as it denied the value of all other forms of mental industry, and failed to perceive that what the human mind needs is exercise and not necessarily Greek exercise or Latin exercise. A special must not thus dethrone a universal. A king may be a good governor, but his courtiers and sons and daughters must not overrate the crowned man and predict the utter failure of any nation that may ever dare attempt to live without the help of a throne and royal children. Evidently the greatest, widest truth, is that the mind is made more powerful by exercise, and it will always be a secondary consideration

whether this exercise shall come by loading the memory with the words and forms found in several languages, by compelling the judgment to work continually amid the many possibilities of syntax and translation, or shall come by a direct study of facts and causes and laws, as found in science and history and literature.

It favors the classic course amazingly that no other course of mental development has ever been attempted in what is called the great era—the Christian era; but it might well shake our opinion, the thought that the Greeks and Latins became great without being fed exclusively upon a diet of grammars and dictionaries and mathematics. Richter asks, "Whither do those sunflowers turn which grow upon the sun?" So may we ask, what made mighty those children that were born into the classic tongues? What made the man Pericles and the man Plato? and the women Sappho and Aspasia? What seven years' course

had they in dead languages? There can be but one answer, and that must be that the mind is made powerful and great by all far-reaching after the truths and fancies around it—by a constant and loving effort to enlarge its powers and accumulations. Pericles and Plato and Cicero and Humboldt and Mill and Webster and Clay were educated by intellectual toil and hope and zeal in their adjacent worlds, whatever those worlds may have been. The class-rooms of Oxford and Cambridge are, indeed, good worlds for the forming mind to master, but not many of the eagles of genius have, comparatively speaking, taken in such linguistic schools their first lessons in lofty flight. All the ages are school-houses, and the great men have been those who never played truant nor shirked, but who loved the school-house, whether it was by the Nile, under Rameses, or at Athens, under Pericles, or at Oxford, under Elizabeth or Victoria.

The Latin and Greek tongues once possessed an inestimable worth, because there was little of broad and powerful thought outside of those two literatures, and within them there were a power and beauty not yet perhaps surpassed. Soon after the opening of the Christian drama, the human mind became enslaved by a politico-religious government, which discouraged all thought, except that which tended to establish a throne and mark out an expensive way to a strange heaven, or a still more strange hell. Mind grew narrower and weaker as the centuries passed by. Scholars were content to write the life of some ascetic monk, and to fill up with miracles a life that had been empty of both usefulness and food. Far along in the clouded periods, when some of the monks happened upon Latin and Greek books, it was as though the deaf had begun to hear, the blind to see, and the dumb to speak. Compared with a biography of some whining

zealot, whose glory lay in the scarcity of his food, and in the abundance of his personal dirt, the poems of Homer and Virgil, and the orations of Cicero and the meditations of Plato, were full of almost divine beauty, and thus exalted by a value both intrinsic and relative, Latin and Greek ascended the throne in the great kingdom of mind and sentiment. No broader or freer literature than the old classic thought has ever existed. From Homer to Tacitus there was freedom of the mind. No church or state told the thinkers what to think or express. Indeed each ruler was himself a scholar of his period, and, republic or empire, the state was always literary in its tastes and works. The rulers and statesmen were all poets or orators and philosophers, with full permission to select any theme, and to say upon it whatever pleased the hand that held the pen. Through the Latin and Greek gates there rushed out upon the dark Christian ages

a stream of intellectual liberty and power. Out of stones so noble, the colleges and universities, which now reckon their ages by centuries, built up their greatness of merit and fame, and our age will never be able to express too much gratitude toward those old states which furnished the new epoch with such foundations of mental and spiritual development.

We come now to a universal phenomenon—that of the pupil excelling the master. Moses was surpassed by Daniel and Isaiah. Watts' engine is superseded. The man who taught music to Beethoven is forgotten in the splendor of his humble student. Modern Europe has moved far beyond old Greece, and in the modern languages and literature and sciences, all said and thought of on the coast of the old Mediterranean finds its amazing equivalent. Once the roll of human greatness read thus: Homer, Hesiod, Æschylus, Euripides, Pericles, Plato, Virgil, Cicero, Cæsar, Tacitus, and

the splendor of the catalogue none will have the rashness to deny; but in the later centuries the book so long sealed has been opened, and there have been added Dante and Milton and Shakspeare and Goethe and Schiller, and such thinkers as Bacon and Newton, and such students as Cuvier and Humboldt and Muller and Darwin and Huxley and Agassiz. By these enormous additions the equilibrium of the old earth has been disturbed, and a side, which once lay in perpetual shadow, enjoys now a long summer-time. The buried palms and ferns of the Arctic latitude tell us that what is now the North Pole, and the region of almost lifeless frost, was once a land upon which the warm sun shone, and over which hot thunder-storms passed. Some external force came to make the planet revolve upon some new inclination of its axis, and to remand to night and ice a continent which had once enjoyed the seasons, which

now bless America or France. Into the intellectual world came a wonderful company of modern princes—a Newton, equalling a Plato, and a Shakspeare balancing all antiquity; and, under the heavy footsteps of all these moderns, the earth has been whirled about, and a longer and deeper shadow falls upon the land, where Demosthenes once thundered, and Sappho once sang. With this tipping over of the earth, the Greek and Roman lands lost their exclusiveness of empire, and were invited to become only brotherly states in a world-wide republic. The reasons for the long, patient study of those old tongues have, in part, thus passed away, since they are no longer the languages, which contain the most or the best of human learning and thought. As acquisitions and as mental exercises, those languages will always be valuable, but this will take place henceforth, in a world where other studies, equally valuable in all respects,

will present their claims to the student, old or young, abounding in wealth or pinched by poverty. As language is made up of embalmed ideas, the modern tongues must be confessed to be powerful rivals of Greek and Latin, for the world having grown larger since Homer and Virgil, the modern tongues contain more ideas than were held by all the ancient kingdoms and republics.

Not only is it questionable whether the dead languages should any longer outrank, as studies, the great modern dialects, but it is also a matter of grave doubt whether an argument can be framed in support of the educational theory which devotes years, early and late, to the study of any of the forms of speech, ancient or modern. It may seem a form of mortal sin—a sin beyond the reach of masses and holy water—to confess that there exists, under Heaven, any such doubt, and yet something must be said on this linguistic mania,

even though the utterance should prove most amazing and unwelcome. Language in essence is a catalogue of names. Words are the names of things and of actions. If Æschylus spoke of *kumaton anarithmaton gelasma*, he saw and embalmed in sound the beautiful truth of nature, and the merit lies not in the sounds of the vowels and consonants, but in the genius that saw, in the morning ripple of the sea, "the numberless smiles of the waves." What the human soul needed was some one able to lay upon the broad ocean that sweetness of expression which had been sought for and found only upon the lips and face of woman. If a smile is a sudden flash of light and kindness, then what an interperter of the ocean is he who first tells us to look out upon its wide-spread and delicate smilings! But it is not the language that is so great; it is the sudden spiritualizing of the ocean. Language is only a name for the strange

beauty of the water, and, hence, it is of no consequence whether the name be "*kumaton anarithmaton gelasma*," or the "sea's innumerable smile," or the "many twinkling smile of the waves," or whether the Frenchman, or German, or Spaniard bedecks the simile with his raiment of words and syntax. The expression uttered by the Greek poet becomes the world's single fact and property, and the possession of a hundred languages by any one individual will not add anything whatever to that morning and evening radiance of the Atlantic or Pacific. When we who had spent seven years over Greek, first stood upon the sea-shore, our hearts asked the old dead tongue to help us estimate that infinite scintillation of the flood; and did we not, all of us, bless God that He had permitted us to study Greek? Did we not feel that all who had not read the "Prometheus" in the original were cut off from nature, as though born blind? What a

mistake of a name for a substance! for now when all we ex-denizens, far away at last from college walls, happen upon the beach, and look out upon the blue, we ask for no more blessed expression of the scene than our own tongue can bring us in its powerful sounds, "the numberless smiles of the waves." Goethe expressed the same thought in the German, Lamartine in the French; and thus let the speech change a thousand times, there is only the one thought hidden away in the varied accents.

In any one of the great modern tongues there is now stored away all the facts of the earth up to this date. If Virgil asked us to note the beauty of the moon at midnight, when it passes in and out amid fleecy clouds, we so do, and our heart is happy or sad, as was his, it being of no importance that he called the planet "*luna*," while we call it "*moon*," and that he called "*nubila*" those masses which

we call "*clouds*." Compared with the grandeur of the scene, all these variations of the vowels and intonations are things of childish importance. It might, therefore, easily come to pass that the student, young or old, may, in the study of many tongues, be giving years of time to accidental matters, instead of to those facts of being and action which are the permanent and valuable estate of man. A certain Roman orator we call Cicero. In his own day he may have been called Tullius. Intimate friends may have called him Marcus. We do not now know how his family pronounced the "c" or the "u." But let it be true that this lawyer had three names, and that there are many possible ways of uttering those names, the one fact only remains valuable—the man himself. As such he has entered into the world's intellectual and moral riches, and we have him, be we German or French or English, in our lip and tongue service. Com-

pared with this gold of possession, all else is dust. To compare the thoughts of this lofty Roman with the thoughts of Burke and Pitt and Sumner, in the arena of political study; to pass over to morals, and compare him with Puffendorf and Spencer; to pass to religion, and compare him with Wesley or Stuart Mill or Jefferson; to pass to rhetoric, and compare his mode of argument with that of Fox or Webster or Clay—would be to be engaged in pursuits greater than a mastery of these tongues, in which all these widely separated minds may have done their sincere thinking in the sight of man and God. Their words, like their clothing or their food, were local and incidental. Indeed, of less importance than the food these chieftains ate, for that food might be good for us to imitate or avoid, whereas it is of little value to us that Cicero called that being *Deus* whom we call God, and that quality "pietas" which we call

"piety." It is the unchanging contents of the earth man must chiefly seek, and so brief is life that its lamp burns out before we have read the great volume of events and experiences, and no time is left for the study of those strange marks and sounds in which Egyptian or Persian or Athenian or Roman may have made record of his life or wisdom or sentiment. A hundred languages have passed away, in all of which the golden rule was putting forth its slow leaves, and men care not with what gutturals or labials or aspirates the first moralists began to express the worth to society of brotherly love. As man himself has come along over lands which have become deserts, passing in and out of temples and homes which have become dust, and falling into tombs which have no stone and by which no flower blooms, and yet he is here to-day in divine splendor; so truths, like the law of love, have come along, stepping

from language to language, and then leaving to decay or neglect the stairway of their long ascent. So subordinate is language to idea that the Christian world, which rests its hope upon the beatitudes of Jesus, does not know in what speech He first said, "Blessed are the pure in heart." As the sea changes its shore line, and leaves far inland temples which once stood where the solemnity of the waves joined in the worship, and yet it is the same sea, flowing and re-flowing in tide and storm, so humanity leaves as dead and abandoned its old shores of speech, and along some new coast of forms and sounds flows and re-flows with a tide of wisdom and emotion rising higher as the ages pass. Each great language, English, French, German, is the present shore of the living sea, and if born into one of these tongues, that tongue is for you or me a measureless main. It is the aggregate of the past six thousand years.

Do I speak French? Not yet have I learned the universe hidden away in the language of my birth and soul. When you have caught up with the world's facts, then, if time remains, you might ask what the Frenchman would call those facts. After having studied the life, the tendencies, the loves of the sun-worshipers and the Egyptians; after having seen the Queen of Sheba journeying to behold the greatness of Solomon; after having committed to memory the sublime chants of Job; after an inquiry into old liberty and old bondage, and into old science and art, it might be of interest to know what letters and sounds a Frenchman would use in expressing the world's history, but to know all about the wanderings of Ulysses and his son is the thing to be desired more than the information that the French called the father Ulysse and the son *Telemaque.*

Let it be conceded that persons who are to

devote all their life to intellectual pursuits have time for mastering several of the great dialects, ancient and existing; it yet remains a fair inquiry, what quantity of this linguistic work may enter into those courses of study, over which the multitude must pass. Must young persons who have only one idea learn ten ways of expressing it? Or must this person, often a beautiful girl, find ten ideas in the grand language of her native land? What made a Rubenstein was not a score of pianos, but it was genius and labor, practicing upon one adequate instrument. It is well known that, when some years ago certain thousands of families, men and women, were flying before a great conflagration, one citizen was seen to remove from his library nine violins of all ages and pedigrees—a scene made laughable, even at such a gloomy time, by the equally well known fact that this lover of the fiddle could not, from any or all of the strings,

elicit more than the one-ninth part of a tune. As the cart-load of instruments moved onward toward a place of safety, even the best friends of the amateur could not help wishing that the noble gentleman had less of fiddle and more of music. In the department of fashionable education a similar event may be detected in the fact that many young persons are learning more ways of expressing thought than they have thoughts to express, and instead of having ten ideas of value, they give promise of reaching, at last, ten methods of stating one idea, and perhaps a small one at that. For suppose your beautiful daughter of seventeen years has, by much toil and expense, learned to say in five tongues, "He has the pretty yellow dog;" in Greek: *Ehei kalon chloon kuna;* in Latin: *Habet bellum canem gilvum;* in French: *Il a un joli chien de jaune;* in German: *Er hat der schon gelb hund;* and could she by industry find the

Chinese and Zulu vowel sounds, used by those remote peoples, to convey that idea of property in an animal, it would be well for the girl and parent to remember that, amid all this variety of speech, there is only the same yellow dog all the time. Under some other theory of education, the mind might have mastered the whole science of Cuvier, and have moved away from the yellow dog to study the whole animal kingdom, from the elephants of India to the garden-making birds of the tropics, and the bank-swallow of America. The poor man, in the cold of mid-winter, does not need ten shovels with which to put one ton of coal into the scuttle, but what he craves is ten tons of coal and one good shovel. It might be of interest to him to know the shape of a Russian or Hindoo scoop, to gaze at the kind of instrument by which the Hebrews put wheat into a sack, or apples into an ox-cart, but the highest happiness of the multitude will always

come more from the coal they may possess in December, than from any collection they might covet of old and modern utensils of lifting and moving fuel from vault to grate. If the remark will not give any offense, it may be let fall here, that there are thousands of boys and girls, older and younger, whose ability to express thought has quite outgrown the thought they have on hand awaiting expression, and, having mastered a great many styles of saying things, they are finding themselves in the position of having nothing to say. When the lovely young lady, who had mastered her French and Italian and Spanish, was led by some machine-loving gentleman to gaze for a moment at the great engines, in the hydraulic works of Chicago, asked him, in her delight, whether the big wheel was turned by men or by a horse, it gave him no peace that she could have put the inquiry into any one of the modern tongues.

The question placed him, for a time, beyond the consolation of philosophy and religion.

The prevailing idea among the upper American classes that even their little children must learn French, and to that end must speak it at the table, is highly blamable, for reasons more than one. It is based upon entire ignorance of the fact that it will require the life-time of each mortal to master the language of his birth and country. All the young years given by Americans to the study of French, are years turned away from the greatest language yet known to man. All the acquisitions of the human race, all the sciences, and arts, and histories, and sentiments of humanity have passed into the English tongue. Each word stands for an idea, and in each great modern dialect all ideas reappear. He that has perfectly mastered his own language has a store of information immense in bulk and rich in value. To excavate many

channels for a river is to lessen the unity and power of the stream otherwise majestic. It will always be proof of some blunder of judgment, or of some stubborn vanity, when Americans will be found using a little French, and German, and Italian, who have not mastered the English of William Wirt, or of Tennyson, or of the eloquent Ruskin. It is not *languages* man needs, but *language*. It is not a room full of violins, but the power to make music. It is therefore simply painful to hear a fashionable girl or woman or man, combining several languages in conversation when the listener knows well that this bright talker could not by any possibility compose an essay in the English of Washington Irving, or Charles Sumner, or the poet Whittier. While they have trifled with grammars and lexicons, or have said elegantly this or that compliment of the season, their own grand English has moved away from their mind and heart just

as husband and home at last disappear from the world of the artful beauty, leaving in her possession the old faded bouquets and the old yellow cards of invitation to dinner or to dance —invitations sent and accepted long ago, when the forehead was smooth and the lips red.

A modern language is a prodigious affair. All will admit that as a system of sounds for expressing truths the Greek language has no equal, but it comes short in just this particular—that the Greeks had not as much to express as the Germans and French and English now have in their keeping. An island has become a continent, a river has widened into a sea. Each of these three modern tongues holds in its embrace a universe, while Greek held only a star. To master one of these new forms of speech is the task of a life, and happy the American who shall ever reach in his own tongue the ease and skill reached in their own tongue by Chateaubriand and Lamartine, and

by Castelar in his dialect, or by Schiller in the rich German. Such a result cannot be reached by attempts to study the words of Lamartine and Gœthe, but by studying the same universe as that which enveloped them, and by compelling our own English harp to play for us all our sincere and passionate music. It must be that the popularity of French comes from a forgetfulness of the absolute immensity of the English language—an immenseness which asks for many years of early and late study, and which should so captivate each one born into its confines that, like the contented soul, one should never care to wander away from home.

The chase after French must come from the want of thought as to the greatness of our own speech, and hence must be one of the popular delusions of the age, but there lies against this worship of French a separate objection. In our generation that nation is not coming to us

as Greece came, laden with deep and inspiring thoughts. Greek speech was once the speech of the world's greatest minds. We recall Plato and Aristotle and Thucydides, and that type of manhood. These were the men who projected Greek into the old courses of study. But that old type of manhood is now standing in England and Germany and America, and the French verbs and nouns and adjectives are coming to us only in the name of fashion and Paris. "*Parlez vous Francais*," simply means, "Have you seen Paris?" Have you some of her dresses, her dramas, her wall-paper, her furniture, her luxury? A language which sets us all wild for elegant clothing and for handsomer furniture and for new shapes of wedding cards, and which so delights us at the drama, can never come in the dignity of those old classic verbs which never mentioned anything except the great emotions and exploits of the soul. The Greek showed

man human life in its wars and travels and rhetoric and logic and liberty and æsthetic yearnings, but the French of our boarding-schools does little for the average student, except enable him or her to read the bill of fare at a fashionable hotel, and to call by the charming name of *buffet* what once was a sideboard, and to buy and enjoy as an *escritoire* what had once been known as a writing-desk, and to feel wise over that progress which removes from a lady her work-table, and places before her a *chiffoniere*. So far as the study of this modern dialect inflames the young heart in the direction of bills of fare and novelties for the parlor or dining-room, it can hardly compare favorably with the study of those classic forms which ignored the hotel-keeper and the cook, and introduced the student to Homer and Cicero.

The world's facts and experiences being gathered up in language, there must needs be

men skilled in different languages, that the goods of one land may be transported to another country. Thus Champollion became a transfer boat to ship Egyptian history and learning from hieroglyph to French. Others came to forward the goods from French to English. Immense is this carrying trade—Carlyle carried Goethe across the channel; Longfellow has brought Dante across the sea. But not all the educated need embark in this form of importation, for what we all need is not the key to the hieroglyphics on the old rocks, but the English of the things thus recorded. The Sermon on the Mount is journeying around the world in two hundred tongues, but it is not an acquaintance with these forms the young or old soul needs, but the Sermon on the Mount in the native tongue of him who must live and die among its sublime lessons. Diamonds may be re-set, and having passed a generation upon a queen's

hand, they may be seen on the neck of her daughter, and at last be transferred to a coronet; but the essential value is in the glittering stones themselves, be they on forehead or finger. It is not otherwise with the truths which man has evolved from his observation and experience. They are all one, whether they are whispered to his ear by English or Greek or Arabian lips, and blessed is he to whom some one of these great voices has come with its infinite utterances about time and the world called timeless. When, therefore, a distinguished clergyman declared that when a minister of the Gospel was not keeping well up in Greek he was losing the use of his right arm, he simply blundered along, for the right arm of an orator or statesman or thinker or preacher, can never be in any manner the power to read a foreign text, but it must always be the power to examine or establish a theme which does not

depend in the least upon the vowels and consonants of a time or place. Not a single great idea in the Bible is awaiting any new light from the linguist. The Greek and Hebrew lexicons can do nothing toward answering a single one of the problems of mankind; can shed no light upon the existence of a God, or a life beyond, or upon the path of duty, and hence a long dwelling over those old forms cannot be the right arm of a clergyman. His inspiration must come from ideas mighty as the human race, and not from any wonderment what some particle may have implied when Moses was a lad, or when John was baptizing in the wilderness.

Even when a whole life is given to one's native English or native French, so inadequate still is that language to express the soul that it seems a form of wickedness to divide the heart between many masters, and to have no supreme friend. Chateaubriand, the greatest

master of the French tongue, when he stood near the Niagara Falls almost a hundred years ago, and saw evening coming down from the sky upon all the sublime scene; saw the woods growing gloomy in the deep shadows, and heard the sound of the waters increasing its solemnity as the little voices died away in the night's repose, said: "It is not within the power of human words to express this grandeur of nature." Skilled as he was in a most rich and sensitive form of speech, that speech all of whose resources he knew so well, now failed him, and his spirit had to remain imprisoned, there being no gateway by which its sentiments could escape to the heart of his countrymen. What are you and I to do, then, if we have not loved early, and late, and deeply our own English—that English which is now the leader in literature and all learning; if we have not mastered its words, its elegancies, its power of logic, and humor, and

pathos, and rythm; and have not permitted our minds to become rich in its associations; if we have for years gone along with a heart divided in its love, or with a mind that has studied words more than it has thought and prayed and laughed and wept amid the sublime scenes of nature, or the more impressive mysteries of mankind? "*Parlez vous francais?*" Not well; not at all; would to Heaven we could even learn to speak English.