

## The Study of Classics

### 1. Thomas Hobbes

*Leviathan*, chapter 21, "Of the Liberty of Subjects" (excerpt)

The liberty whereof there is so frequent and honourable mention in the histories and philosophy of the ancient Greeks and Romans, and in the writings and discourse of those that from them have received all their learning in the politics, is not the liberty of particular men, but the liberty of the Commonwealth: which is the same with that which every man then should have, if there were no civil laws nor Commonwealth at all. And the effects of it also be the same. For as amongst masterless men, there is perpetual war of every man against his neighbour; no inheritance to transmit to the son, nor to expect from the father; no propriety of goods or lands; no security; but a full and absolute liberty in every particular man: so in states and Commonwealths not dependent on one another, every Commonwealth, not every man, has an absolute liberty to do what it shall judge, that is to say, what that man or assembly that representeth it shall judge, most conducing to their benefit. But withal, they live in the condition of a perpetual war, and upon the confines of battle, with their frontiers armed, and cannons planted against their neighbours round about. The Athenians and Romans were free; that is, free Commonwealths: not that any particular men had the liberty to resist their own representative, but that their representative had the liberty to resist, or invade, other people. There is written on the turrets of the city of Luca in great characters at this day, the word LIBERTAS; yet no man can thence infer that a particular man has more liberty or immunity from the service of the Commonwealth there than in Constantinople. Whether a Commonwealth be monarchical or popular, the freedom is still the same.

But it is an easy thing for men to be deceived by the specious name of liberty; and, for want of judgment to distinguish, mistake that for their private inheritance and birthright which is the right of the public only. And when the same error is confirmed by the authority of men in reputation for their writings on this subject, it is no wonder if it produce sedition and change of government. In these western parts of the world we are made to receive our opinions concerning the institution and rights of Commonwealths from Aristotle, Cicero, and other men, Greeks and Romans, that, living under popular states, derived those rights, not from the principles of nature, but transcribed them into their books out of the practice of their own Commonwealths, which were popular; as the grammarians describe the rules of language out of the practice of the time; or the rules of poetry out of the poems of Homer and Virgil. And because the Athenians were taught (to keep them from desire of changing their government) that they were freemen, and all that lived under monarchy were slaves; therefore Aristotle puts it down in his Politics "In democracy, liberty is to be supposed: for it is commonly held that no man is free in any other government." And as Aristotle, so Cicero and other writers have grounded their civil doctrine on the opinions of the Romans, who were taught to hate monarchy: at first, by them that, having deposed their sovereign, shared amongst them the sovereignty of Rome; and afterwards by their successors. And by reading of these Greek and Latin authors, men from their childhood have gotten a habit, under a false show of liberty, of favouring tumults, and of licentious controlling the actions of their sovereigns; and again of controlling those controllers; with the effusion of so much blood, as I think I may truly say there was never anything so dearly bought as these western parts have bought the learning of the Greek and Latin tongues.

### 2. Benjamin Rush and John Adams

A "Dialogue" on Classical Languages

*Adams (September 16, 1810)*

But now I must tell you a great and grave truth. I am among your most serious haters of the philological species. I do most cordially hate you for writing against Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. I never will forgive you until you repent, retract, and reform. No never! It is impossible...

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*Rush (October 2, 1810)*

Hate on, and call upon all the pedagogues in Massachusetts to assist you with their hatred of me, and I will after all continue to say that it is folly and madness to spend four or five years in teaching boys the Latin and Greek languages. I admit a knowledge of the Hebrew to be useful to divines, also as much of the Greek as will enable them to read the Greek Testament, but the Latin is useless and even hurtful to young men in the manner in which it is now taught. We do not stand in need now of Greek and Roman poets, historians, and orators. Shakespeare, Milton, Thomson, Pope, Hume, Robertson, Burke, Curran, Fénelon, Bourdaloue, and a dozen others that might be named *more* than fill their places. Were every Greek and Latin book (the New Testament excepted) consumed in a bonfire, the world would be the wiser and better for it... "Delenda, delenda est lingua Romana" should be the voice of reason and liberty and humanity in every part of the world.

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*Adams* (October 12, 1810)

Mrs. Adams says she is willing you should discredit Greek and Latin because it will destroy the foundation of all the pretensions of the gentlemen to superiority over the ladies and restore liberty, equality, and fraternity between the sexes. What does Mrs. Rush think of this.

Hobbes calumniated the classics because they filled young men's heads with ideas of liberty and excited them to rebellion against Leviathan...

[Adams continues: "Suppose we should agree to study the oriental languages, especially the Arabic, instead of Greek and Latin." He suggests that the languages of Mohammed, Tamerlane and Ghengis Khan would be more congenial to men like Napoleon who were aspiring to world domination.]

...But to be serious, if I were possessed of sovereign mortal power over your hospital,...I would put you into your own tranquilizer until I cured you of your fanaticism against Greek and Latin...

My friend, you will labor in vain. As the love of science and taste for the fine arts increases in the world, the admiration of Greek and Roman science and literature will increase. Both are increasing very fast.

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*Rush* (December 21, 1810)

You have made no impression upon me by your arguments in favor of the dead languages. Napoleon would have been just what he is had he never read a page of ancient history. Rulers become tyrants and butchers from instinct much oftener than from imitation. As well might we suppose the human race would have been extinct had not Ovid bequeathed to modern nations his "arte amandi" as suppose that modern villains are made by ancient examples. Royal crimes, like yellow fevers, spring up spontaneously in similar circumstances in every country and in every age.

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*Rush* (January 10, 1811)

You say an attention to dead languages has revived in Europe. This is true, and Napoleon is at the head of the junto confederated to restore and establish them. It is one among many other of his acts that are calculated and perhaps intended to bring back the darkness and ignorance of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Cardinal Richelieu created and diffused a love for music, dancing, and other amusements among the people of France on purpose to divert them from prying into the machinations and oppressions of the government of Louis the XIV. The study of the Latin and Greek languages will serve the same purpose to Napoleon and George the Third...

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*Adams* (January 18, 1811)

I will not deny [Napoleon] the glory that is due to him. It is true that no man, prince or subject, has distinguished himself more by the patronage of science, literature, and the fine arts than Napoleon. This and toleration are the brightest jewels in his crown. I cannot, however, do so much honor to him as to ascribe to this second resurrection of learning to him; it is rather due to the American Revolution. That great event turned the thoughts and studies of men of learning to the ancient Greeks, their language, their antiquities, their forms of government...

We need not fear that Latin and Greek will ever be too much studied. Not one in ten thousand of those who study them in schools and colleges ever make great proficiency in them. In general, scholars are

enabled to understand their own languages the better for the smattering they acquire in the classics, and to examine a passage occasionally in Latin...

Source: *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813*, ed. John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair. San Marino, Calif.: The Huntington Library, 1966. 166-177.

3. John Adams to John Quincy Adams (Amsterdam, May 1781)  
**On Classical Education**

You go on, I presume, with your latin Exercises: and I wish to hear of your beginning upon Sallust who is one of the most polished and perfect of the Roman Historians, every Period of whom, and I had almost said every Syllable and every Letter is worth Studying.

In Company with Sallust, Cicero, Tacitus and Livy, you will learn Wisdom and Virtue. You will see them represented, with all the Charms which Language and Imagination can exhibit, and Vice and Folly painted in all their Deformity and Horror.

You will ever remember that all the End of study is to make you a good Man and a useful Citizen.—This will ever be the Sum total of the Advice of your affectionate Father.

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I want to have you [devote your attention to] some higher Authors than Phaedrus and Nepos. I want to have you [devote your attention to] Demosthenes. The plainer Authors you may learn yourself at any time. I absolutely insist upon it, that you begin upon Demosthenes, and Cicero. I will not be put by [i.e., disobeyed]. You may learn Greek from Demosthenes and Homer as well as from Isocrates and Lucian—and Latin from Virgil and Cicero as well as Phaedrus and Nepos.

What should be the Cause of the Aversion to Demosthenes in the World I know not, unless it is because his sentiments are wise and grand, and he teaches not frivolities.

If there is no other Way, I will take you home, and teach you Demosthenes and Homer myself.  
I am your affectionate Father, John Adams.

Source: *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. L.H. Butterfield and M. Friedlaender. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1973. 4:117, 144.

4. **Thomas Jefferson**  
to John Brazier (August 24, 1819)  
**On Classical Education**

You ask my opinion on the extent to which classical learning should be carried in our country. A sickly condition permits me to think, and a rheumatic hand to write too briefly on this litigated question. The utilities we derive from the remains of the Greek and Latin languages are, first, as models of pure taste in writing. To these we are certainly indebted for the national and chaste style of modern composition which so much distinguishes the nations to whom these languages are familiar. Without these models we should probably have continued the inflated style of our northern ancestors, or the hyperbolic and vague one of the east. Second. Among the values of classical learning, I estimate the luxury of reading the Greek and Roman authors in all the beauties of their originals. And why should not this innocent and elegant luxury take its preeminent stand ahead of all those addressed merely to the senses? I think myself more indebted to my father for this than for all the other luxuries his cares and affections have placed within my reach; and more now than when younger, and more susceptible of delights from other sources. When the decays of age have enfeebled the useful energies of the mind, the classic pages fill up the vacuum of *ennui*, and become sweet composers to that rest of the grave into which we are all sooner or later to descend. Third. A third value is in the stores of real science deposited and transmitted us in these languages, to-wit: in history, ethics, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, natural history, &c.

But to whom are these things useful? Certainly not to all men. There are conditions of life to which they must be forever estranged, and there are epochs of life too, after which the endeavor to attain them would be a great misemployment of time. Their acquisition should be the occupation of our early years only, when the memory is susceptible of deep and lasting impressions, and reason and judgment not yet strong enough for abstract speculations. To the moralist they are valuable, because they furnish ethical writings highly and justly esteemed: although in my own opinion, the moderns are far advanced beyond them in this line of science, the divine finds in the Greek language a translation of his primary code, of more importance to him than the original because better understood; and, in the same language, the newer code, with the doctrines of the earliest fathers, who lived and wrote before the simple precepts of the founder of this most benign and pure of all systems of morality became frittered into subtleties and mysteries, and hidden under jargons incomprehensible to the human mind. To these original sources he must now, therefore, return, to recover the virgin purity of his religion. The lawyer finds in the Latin language the system of civil law most conformable with the principles of justice of any which has ever yet been established among men, and from which much has been incorporated into our own. The physician as good a code of his art as has been given us to this day. Theories and systems of medicine, indeed, have been in perpetual change from the days of the good Hippocrates to the days of the good Rush, but which of them is the true one? the present, to be sure, as long as it is the present, but to yield its place in turn to the next novelty, which is then to become the true system, and is to mark the vast advance of medicine since the days of Hippocrates. Our situation is certainly benefited by the discovery of some new and very valuable medicines; and substituting those for some of his with the treasure of facts, and of sound observations recorded by him (mixed to be sure with anilities of his day) and we shall have nearly the present sum of the healing art. The statesman will find in these languages history, politics, mathematics, ethics, eloquence, love of country, to which he must add the sciences of his own day, for which of them should be unknown to him? And all the sciences must recur to the classical languages for the etymon, and sound understanding of their fundamental terms. For the merchant I should not say that the languages are a necessary. Ethics, mathematics, geography, political economy, history, seem to constitute the immediate foundations of his calling. The agriculturist needs ethics, mathematics, chemistry and natural philosophy. The mechanic the same. To them the languages are but ornament and comfort. I know it is often said there have been shining examples of men of great abilities in all the businesses of life, without any other science than what they had gathered from conversations and intercourse with the world. But who can say what these men would not have been had they started in the science on the shoulders of a Demosthenes or Cicero, of a Locke or Bacon, or a Newton? To sum the whole, therefore, it may truly be said that the classical languages are a solid basis for most, and an ornament to all the sciences.

## 5. Thomas Jefferson

A Classical Education

Letter to Dr. Joseph Priestley, January 27, 1800 (excerpt)

Dear Sir, - In my last letter of the 18th, I omitted to say anything of the languages as part of our proposed University. It was not that I think, as some do, that they are useless. I am of a very different opinion. I do not think them very essential to the obtaining eminent degrees of science; but I think them very useful towards it. I suppose there is a portion of life during which our faculties are ripe enough for this, and for nothing more useful. I think the Greeks and Romans have left us the present models which exist of fine composition, whether we examine them as works of reason, or of style and fancy; and to them we probably owe these characteristics of modern composition. I know of no composition of any other people, which merits the least regard as a model for its matter or style. To all this I add, that to read the Latin and Greek authors in their original, is a sublime luxury as in architecture, painting, gardening, or other arts. I enjoy Homer in his own language infinitely beyond Pope's translation of him, and both beyond the dull narrative of the same events by Dares Phrygius; and it is an innocent enjoyment. I thank on my knees, Him who directed my early education, for having put into my possession this rich source of delight; and I would not exchange it for anything which I could then have acquired, or have not since acquired.

Source: Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*. New York: Library of America, 1984. 1072.