MILTON AS A WRITER ON EDUCATION

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Milton’s contribution to educational theory, although neatly classified and apparently disposed of by several writers, still has possibilities for the investigator. Oscar Browning tells of a rude shock that his ideas on the subject once received, when he first thought of reprinting Milton’s Tractate Of Education. “One of the senior masters at my school,” says Browning, “set Milton as a subject for a Latin theme to his division, and told his boys that they were to prove that Milton, like Burke, went mad in his old age. I had never heard of this idea before, and I asked the master on what grounds it rested. He replied, ‘Did he not write a crack-brained book about education, in his old age?’ I concluded that my scheme was useless, and gave it up.’” Fortunately, however, Browning’s discouragement was not final. Thanks to him and to others, Milton’s ideas are to-day somewhat better known. And yet, if one may judge from the readiness with which some educators dispose of Milton, their interest does not seem to have penetrated much further than that of Browning’s senior master, more than seventy years ago.

Milton’s direct experience in teaching lasted only a few years; but the subject of education occupied his thoughts at frequent intervals throughout his whole life, as one may see from the many allusions to it in his writings. Even as an undergraduate at Cambridge, Milton was interested in educational theory. In one of his academic exercises,¹ an address delivered before his fellow-students and his instructors, he attacks the problem, vigorously condemning the barren subtleties of scholastic philosophy, which was then a prominent part of the curriculum, and contrasting it with the pleasures of history, literature, and natural science, in which he would have preferred to spend his time. His little treatise on education appeared some twelve or fifteen years later (1644) in the midst of his earlier writings on public reform. Another notable reference to education is to be found in the tract, The

¹ Maidsen, Life of Milton, 1.281.
Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church (1659). Here Milton desires better schools in different parts of England for the purpose of educating the clergy, without the necessity of their attending the University. 2 Again, in The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth, Milton’s last direct effort in what he believed to be the cause of liberty, he has these remarkable words on the relation of education to representative government: “To make the people fittest to choose, and the chosen fittest to govern, will be to mend our corrupt and faulty education, to teach the people faith, not without virtue, temperance, modesty, sobriety, parsimony, justice; not to admire wealth or honor; to hate turbulence and ambition; to place every one his private welfare and happiness in the public peace, liberty, and safety.” 3 Sound education, therefore, is the very basis of Milton’s political structure. Even in Paradise Lost, as a friend of mine at a neighboring university has recently pointed out, Milton’s thought was occupied with education as well as with theology and ethics. 4 These examples show that the idea of a better education was by no means a Utopian scheme of Milton’s. He connected it with practical matters which he believed to be of the highest importance.

Moreover, the Tractate Of Education, Milton’s principal expression of his views on the subject, is not a casual or isolated essay. In The Second Defense of the People of England there is a passage where Milton, in defending himself from the personal attacks of a foreign writer, gives rather an extended account of his own life and works. After mentioning his writings on the reform of church government and on marriage, he says: “I then discussed the principles of education in a summary manner, but sufficiently copious for those who attend seriously to the subject; than which nothing can be more necessary to principle the minds of men in virtue, the only genuine source of political and individual liberty, the only true safeguard of states, the bulwark of their prosperity and renown.” 5 Thus Milton represents this work as merely incidental to his earlier writings in the cause of reform.

That Milton’s opinions were valued, by at least one of his contemporaries, is evident, for the Tractate was written at the earnest solicitation of a friend—a man of some note in the London of

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2 Prose Works, ed. by St. John, 3:27.
3 Ibid., 2:126.
5 Prose Works, 1:259.
that day. This was Samuel Hartlib, who was well known and highly esteemed as a philanthropist and reformer. Of Prussian birth and Polish-English descent, Hartlib had important friends and correspondents on the Continent as well as in England. His interests ranged all the way from the promotion of mechanical inventions to a scheme of uniting the Protestant churches throughout Europe. Among them was the reform of schools. At the time of Milton’s return to England in 1639, Hartlib was especially active in spreading abroad the ideas of Comenius, the great Moravian teacher. Milton expresses the highest regard for Hartlib’s character and service; and it is significant of the esteem in which Milton was beginning to be held, that such a man as Hartlib should so earnestly desire his opinion on education.

Nevertheless, there are two points in the Tractate Of Education that may scarcely have been pleasing to Hartlib. In the first place, Milton expresses but little regard for Comenius. Milton’s practical sense would naturally lead him to take the more skeptical view of the schemes of Pansophia or Universal Wisdom which at this time were bound up in Comenius’ mind with the plan of educational reform. And it is likely that, after his years of application to study, and his experience as a teacher, Milton not unjustly believed himself quite as competent to theorize on the subject of education as the most of his contemporaries. At all events he expresses entire indifference to Comenius’ writings.

Furthermore, one of the most prominent features of Milton’s plan would be looked upon by Hartlib, and also by most modern educators, as a serious limitation. Milton’s scheme, unlike that of Comenius, is not intended for the children of all classes; and nothing whatever is said about the education of girls. And yet, from Milton’s words in The Commonwealth (quoted above) and from Sonnets 10 and 11 and the eulogy on Queen Christina of Sweden,* we know that Milton was by no means indifferent to these wider interests. In the Tractate he was particularly concerned with the training of leaders in Church and State, and he naturally looked for them among the young men of the best families.

Now, another of Hartlib’s interests was the founding of an agricultural school; consequently, a glance at the reading-list in Milton’s curriculum may have pleased him better. It includes many of the authoritative works of the day on natural science and its applications. That these books, as natural-scientific treatises,

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*Ibid., 1:249-250.*
are now out of date, is no fault of Milton’s. Natural science in the modern sense had then scarcely begun. The including of writers on agriculture, geography, medicine, and natural history must have appealed to Hartlib’s “practical” inclinations. At any rate, it has given rise to a widely spread notion that Milton’s academy was informational, rather than disciplinary, in method, and vocational, rather than cultural, in purpose.

It is significant in this connection that the oldest edition of Milton’s treatise to be found in the library of Beloit College is bound in the same volume with Locke’s Thoughts Concerning Education, a work which is a main source of utilitarian doctrine. The association of the two is not accidental. The editors give as the reason for it, that the subject of Milton’s treatise “seemed more in harmony with the topics discussed by Mr. Locke than with the contents of any other volume in the intended series.”

Charles Lamb in his essay, The Old and the New Schoolmaster, clearly strikes the note of criticism. “The modern schoolmaster,” says he, “is expected to know a little of everything, because his pupil is required not to be entirely ignorant of anything. He must be superficially, if I may say so, omniscient. . . . You may get a notion of some part of his expected duties by consulting the famous Tractate on Education addressed to Mr. Hartlib.”

Dr. Johnson, however, puts the case with greater emphasis, and I may be pardoned for quoting his remarks at more length. In discussing Milton’s school he says:

The purpose of Milton, as it seems, was to teach something more solid than the common literature of the Schools, by reading those authors that treat of physical subjects; such as the Georgick, and astronomical treatises of the ancients. . . .

But the truth is, that the knowledge of external nature, and the sciences which that knowledge requires, or includes, are not the great or the frequent business of the human mind. Whether we provide for action or conversation, whether we wish to be useful or pleasing, the first requisite is the religious and moral knowledge of right and wrong; the next is an acquaintance with the history of mankind, and with those examples which may be said to embody truth, and prove by events the reasonableness of opinions. Prudence and Justice are virtues and excellences, of all times and of all places; we are perpetually moralists, but we are geometricians only by chance. Our intercourse with intellectual nature is necessary; our speculations upon matter are voluntary, and at leisure. Physiological learning is of such rare emergence, that one man may know another half his life, without being able to estimate

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his skill in hydrostaticks or astronomy; but his moral and prudential character immediately appears.

Those authors, therefore, are to be read at schools that supply most axioms of prudence, most principles of moral truth, and most materials for conversation; and these purposes are best served by poets, orators, and historians. 9

This is rather an uncompromising statement of the case for humanism; and yet for this very reason it is wide of the mark as a criticism of Milton. For Milton himself, above all things else, was a humanist. His life was dominated by intellectual and spiritual ideals. He devoted himself, for the good of humanity, to one of the noblest of human endeavors—the creation of beauty in art. And the art to which he dedicated his great powers of intellect and imagination was the art of poetry; poetry, too, not conceived of as amusement or pastime, but inspired by the most vital principle in human nature—the religious instinct.

One who has read Milton’s works with attention and without prejudice can hardly doubt that he was in fundamental agreement with Johnson on the question of what studies are really the most “practical.” The general substance of Johnson’s remarks may be found in different passages of Paradise Lost, 10 and perhaps Milton himself, in deliberate prose, could not have stated his principles more faithfully than Johnson has done.

How, then, has the conception risen that Milton’s scheme of education is materialistic? Simply through judging by the lists of reading alone, without sufficient attention to Milton’s own explanation of his purpose and method.

Two definitions of education are an outstanding feature of the treatise. Near the beginning Milton says: “The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue, which, being united to the heavenly grace of faith, makes up the highest perfection.” 11 After discussing the mistakes of the schools and universities, he says: “I call, therefore, a complete and generous education that which fits a man to perform justly, skilfully, and magnanimously, all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war.” 12

It is possible to see in these two definitions two distinct purposes, not wholly in accord with each other. The first is a religious

12 Ibid., 3:467.
purpose, and may be humanistic; the second, considered by itself, is almost certainly utilitarian. And yet it seems strange, in so brief a work, that Milton should have had two purposes in mind at all; and stranger still, that they should have been in conflict, or even unrelated. Such is probably not the case. The true harmony of Milton’s definitions may perhaps be most clearly shown by the analogy of faith and works. “These two divisions,” says Milton in his *Christian Doctrine*, “though they are distinct in their own nature, and put asunder for the convenience of teaching, cannot be separated in practice.” Now, the basis of Milton’s educational doctrine is character, both as an end in itself, and as the foundation of true service. These two values of character may be separately studied, but in practical life they are inseparable. Milton had no interest in a “fugitive and cloistered virtue” that never emerges in action. Furthermore, an education which does not produce character cannot, in Milton’s estimation, prepare a man for service. For instance, one might suppose that the most important part of a statesman’s education would be political science. But what does Milton say of the young men who leave college to enter politics? “Others,” he says, “betake them to state affairs, with souls so unprincipled in virtue and true generous breeding, that flattery and court-shifts and tyrannous aphorisms appear to them the highest points of wisdom.” To be sure, Milton includes political science in his curriculum; but he sets no great value on science of any kind without right principles to guide and control it.

We may once for all set aside the notion that the school was to be vocational, for Milton expressly states that it is a place of “general studies” in contrast to such special schools as those of law and medicine. The fact of its military organization is more important. Milton labored under no illusions on the subject of war; but he realized the ethical value of military training, as well as its practical necessity.

Let us now glance at one or two interesting features of Milton’s curriculum.

The chief medium of instruction in that day was the Latin language; therefore the pupil’s first task was to acquire it. The customary method of learning Latin in Milton’s time was, first, the memorizing of many cumbrous rules of grammar, (often ar-
ranged, for greater convenience, in rude verse); second, the practice of Latin composition in generous amounts, both in verse and in prose. Some Latin authors, of course, were read; but composition predominated. The pupil began the process about the age of ten, or even younger. If he survived it, he entered the university at the age, perhaps, of sixteen, with a fairly good command of Latin vocabulary, and the ability to understand lectures in the language, and to converse with his fellow-students in it.

The process, however, was not always successful, and never very agreeable. Roger Ascham’s treatise, The Scholemaster, nearly seventy-five years earlier than Milton’s, was the outcome of a conversation over the case of some boys who had run away from Eton School for fear of a beating. One of Comenius’ greatest achievements was in simplifying the method of teaching Latin. The problem was a close parallel to our modern one of how to teach the Freshman to write English. We are attacking it very much as Milton’s contemporaries did—with unlimited quantities of theme-writing.

However, Milton’s views on this subject were revolutionary. He insists on the principle that composition ought to be based on information of some kind, and not painfully spun out of the student’s inner consciousness. He calls it a “preposterous exaction” to demand much writing of students until they have read widely in good authors, and acquired a moderate supply of information as well as a sense of style. Milton believed it possible to teach language chiefly through extensive reading—a belief shared by some good teachers to-day. Moreover, he regarded language, not as an end in itself, but merely as “the instrument conveying to us things useful to be known.” Therefore, after teaching his students the elements of Latin grammar, he led them rapidly through a considerable amount of reading, and deferred the composition until a later part of the course. He followed the same method with Greek, which, of course, as a humanist, Milton felt to be indispensable.

Next to be considered is the subject-matter of the reading. It is chiefly to this that Dr. Johnson applies his criticism. The first authors to be studied are the Latin writers on agriculture; and between the ages, probably, of thirteen and sixteen, the pupils are to read treatises in Greek and Latin on such matters as architecture, astronomy, geography, medicine, and natural history,

18 Roger Ascham, English Works, ed. by Wright, Cambridge, 1904, p. 175.
not forgetting to note the practical applications of these various arts and sciences, or omitting to call in the aid of practitioners for purposes of demonstration. Arithmetic and geometry had been studied in the earliest year of the course.\[17\]

All this looks somewhat as if Dr. Johnson were in the right. And yet, while Milton’s curriculum incidentally imparts a great deal of information, both curious and useful, his ultimate purpose, even in the study of external nature, was to develop the mind through contemplation. This purpose he makes very clear at the outset, when he says that we cannot in any other way arrive so clearly at the knowledge of things invisible as we can by studying the visible creation.\[18\] In one passage of *Paradise Lost* Milton compares Nature, or the entire order of the Universe, to a “scale,” or ladder,

“In contemplation of created things
By steps we may ascend to God.”\[19\]

And in his essay on *The Reason of Church Government* Milton expressly states that the knowledge of God and of his true worship, and what is infallibly good and happy in the state of man’s life, what in itself evil and miserable, is the only high valuable wisdom indeed.\[20\]

Furthermore, the very multitude of subjects covered in so short a time would make it impossible for the student to become very proficient in any one art or science. The course is distinctly a survey; but the reading of one or more unified treatises on each subject, though not expected to make the student even an amateur, would give him just what Milton desired to impart—an insight into the spirit and method of natural science. A final circumstance, of a kind to show that Milton looked upon natural science decidedly from the cultural point of view, is this: the study of external nature is to be rounded off by reading those poets who treat of it, and add to it what Wordsworth calls “the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge, the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science.”\[21\]

\[17\] *Prose Works*, 3:469.

\[18\] Ibid., 3:464.

\[19\] *Paradise Lost*, 5:507–512.

\[20\] *Prose Works*, 2:473.

\[21\] *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, 1800; *Poetical Works*, ed. by Hutchinson, Oxford. 1913, p. 938.
From the study of external nature the pupils proceed, in the next stage of the course, to the study of human ideals and institutions. Between the ages of sixteen and nineteen, they read the standard treatises on ethics, economics, politics, law, theology, and history both sacred and secular. These subjects are more in accord with what are commonly known as the humanities. They are intended, through the study of man and his works, to give the pupils a further insight into the purposes of the Creator, as well as to acquaint them with the nature of practical affairs. Toward the end of this stage, the greatest masterpieces of literature are read, and an attempt is made to impart something of their true spirit to the students.

In the last stage of all, the pupils are to learn the laws of construction that underlie every great type of writing; and now, but not before, are they to be formally trained in the art of composition, "when they shall be thus fraught with an universal insight into things."\(^{22}\)

From Milton's use of natural science as a means of training the mind and building character, it may be inferred that he had no superstitious fear of its destroying religious faith. Indeed, in the matter of scientific truth as opposed to civil or ecclesiastical authority, Milton was on the side of scientific truth; for in visiting the aged Galileo, he defied the Inquisition. Milton, however, believed that true science and true theology both are ultimately rational; and he took no interest in the ingenious opposition between them, which has puzzled some minds since the time, probably, of Heraclitus.

At the same time, he realized that the functions of science and of religion are distinct, and that neither one can do the work of both. Science may lead us to a rational conviction of divine truth, but moral power is supplied by faith alone. Accordingly, since his chief object is the development of character, Milton takes care from the very outset of his course to instill religious faith into the minds of his pupils. "After evening repast, till bedtime," says he, "their thoughts would be best taken up in the easy grounds of religion, and the story of scripture."\(^{23}\) He probably chose the evening as the time when the imagination is most active, and most open to feelings of reverence and affection. The severity of the master would be laid aside; and in after years the pupils would

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\(^{22}\) *Prose Works*, 3:474.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 3:469.
cherish the impressions of these hours with a fondness and tenacity that formal precepts never could evoke.

The Tractate Of Education is so rich in suggestion that one is confined in a brief space to a few such outstanding features as I have discussed. Perhaps Milton's own words at the close of the treatise, since they show that he felt the work to be suggestive rather than final, may bring this paper to a fitting conclusion.

Thus, Mr. Hartlib, you have a general view in writing, as your desire was, of that which at several times I had discoursed with you concerning the best and noblest way of education; . . . many other circumstances also I could have mentioned, but this, to such as have the worth in them to make trial, for light and direction may be enough. Only I believe that this is not a bow for every man to shoot in, that counts himself a teacher; but will require sinews almost equal to those which Homer gave Ulysses; yet I am withal persuaded that it may prove much more easy in the essay, than it now seems at distance, and much more illustrious; howbeit, not more difficult than I imagine, and that imagination presents me with nothing but very happy and very possible according to best wishes; if God have so decreed, and this age have spirit and capacity enough to apprehend.\(^24\)