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# Thomas Paine and the Classics

A. OWEN ALDRIDGE

THE AUTHOR OF A RECENT ARTICLE in the *American Antiquarian Society Proceedings* entitled "Thomas Paine: Was He Really Anti-classical" has affirmed that Paine's "attitude towards the Greek and Latin classics has never been analyzed as a part of the cultural atmosphere of the eighteenth century, nor with the development of a prose that expressed new ways of thinking about old problems."<sup>1</sup> This affirmation is not entirely exact, since H. H. Clark included in the introduction to his widely-used edition of Paine a section entitled "The Influence of Classical Antiquity," and he also considered Paine's opposition to the study of classical languages and his view that ancient civilization was inferior to that of the Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> Anyone who gives Paine's major works a slightly more than superficial examination will come to the conclusion that despite some harsh words concerning the study of Latin and Greek, Paine approved the historical achievements of antiquity and the subject matter of the most famous works in the classical tradition.

The important question, however, is not whether Paine made some complimentary references to a few classical authors or whether, on the other hand, he made disparaging remarks about ancient languages in general. What really matters is to decide which of these two contradictory attitudes is dominant in his works and to understand the principles in his general philosophy which led him to adopt the attitude which is dominant.

For the sake of the record, let us first of all consider the most that can be said to document the view that Paine received a positive influence from the classics, or, to put it another way, that he was a classicist in spite of himself.

Paine's words are, of course, loaded with clichés such as the com-

<sup>1</sup> Richard M. Gummere, in CXXV, Part 2 (1965), 253.

<sup>2</sup> *Thomas Paine*, (American Writers Series) (New York, 1944), pp. xxvii-xxviii.

parison of Washington with Fabius and the reference to Alexander as the Madman of Macedon. He quoted the old Greek proverb concerning Archimedes and the mechanical powers: "had we a place to stand upon, we might raise the world." He used the Latin phrase *Ultima Ratio Regum* in *Crisis* No. 2 to describe Lord Howe's militaristic policy and later in *The Rights of Man* to describe the consuming flame of war. Also he compared the colonial status of America to Hector tied to "the chariot-wheels of Achilles" (*Crisis* No. 3).

In his various periodical essays, he used such pseudonyms as Aesop, Atlanticus, Comus, Humanus, and Vox Populi. He made favorable references to heroes such as Aristides, Epaminondas, Pericles, Scipio, and Camillus; historians such as Diodorus Siculus and Herodotus; philosophers such as Democritus, Diogenes Laërtius, Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato; and to the poet Homer. In his poetry and light essays he referred to mythical deities such as Mercury, Cupid, and Hymen.

He commended the Greeks and Romans for their opposition to duelling, eulogized the Athenian system of government, and praised the dictum of Solon that the best government was that in which "the least injury done to the meanest individual was considered as an insult to the whole Constitution."

He expressed warm approval of Cicero's definition of the Law of Nature: "The true law is right reason, conformable to the nature of things, constant, eternal, diffused through all, which calls us to duty by commanding, deters us from sin by forbidding; which never loses its influence with the good, nor ever preserves it with the wicked."<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere among the "ancient theologians" who had "sublimely treated" the notion of a future state, Paine listed Cicero, Plato, Socrates, and Xenophon.<sup>4</sup>

In Cicero, Paine admired "that vast superiority of mind, that sublimity of right reasoning and justness of ideas, which man acquires, not by studying Bibles and Testaments, and the theology of schools built thereon, but by studying the Creator in the immensity and unchangeable order of His creation, and the immutability of His law."<sup>5</sup> It must be borne in mind, however, that all that Paine

<sup>3</sup> Philip S. Foner, ed. *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine* (New York: 1945), II, 885. Subsequent citations of Paine refer to this edition.

<sup>4</sup> II, 704

<sup>5</sup> II, 885

knew about Cicero he learned from a biography of the Roman philosopher by a heterodox English theologian, Conyers Middleton, which Paine read as a textbook of deism, not as an insight into the classical tradition.

Even more important to eighteenth-century deism than Cicero was Socrates, who figured as a kind of patron saint of the religion of Enlightenment. In the works of such thinkers as Franklin and Rousseau, Socrates appeared as the symbol of opposition to fanaticism and as the martyr of rational thought. Paine, in *A Letter to Mr. Erskine*, cited Socrates as an example of the ambiguity of blasphemy. According to Paine, "Socrates, who lived more than four hundred years before the Christian era, was convicted . . . for preaching against the belief of a plurality of gods, and for preaching the belief of one god, and was condemned to suffer death by poison." The classical authority whom the philosophers of the Enlightenment cited most extensively was probably Plutarch, whose *Lives* served as a kind of scripture. He was incessantly quoted against superstition and in favor of rational inquiry. Paine nowhere mentions Plutarch in his works—a rather significant omission for a writer who is supposed to be much concerned with the classical tradition.

Paine nevertheless acknowledged the values of this tradition and recommended the institution of "a society for enquiring into the ancient state of the world and the state of ancient history, so far as history is connected with systems of religion ancient and modern." He cautioned, however, against an exaggerated respect for tradition on the grounds that "if we travel still further into antiquity, there are a thousand authorities successively contradicting each other." In a completely different context he shrewdly remarked: "How strangely is antiquity treated! To answer some purposes, it is spoken of as the times of darkness and ignorance, and to answer others, it is put for the light of the world."<sup>6</sup>

This is virtually everything in Paine's works which represents the positive influence of the classics. Many other passages which seem to be a tribute to the classical spirit turn out to be, when properly interpreted, actually a disparagement. He remarked, for example, "I know not whether Homer or Euclid had sons; but I will venture an opinion, that if they had, and had left their works unfinished, these sons could not have completed them."<sup>7</sup> But else-

<sup>6</sup> I, 387

<sup>7</sup> I, 368

where he retracts this praise, observing: "I am not contending for the morality of Homer; on the contrary, I think it a book of false glory, tending to inspire immoral and mischievous notions of honor, and with respect to Æsop, though the moral is in general just, the fable is often cruel; and the cruelty of the fable does more injury to the heart, especially in a child, than the moral does good to the judgment."<sup>8</sup>

In comparison to the rather generalized and subdued language in Paine's works concerning the merits of the classics, the terms in which he questions the value of studying them are concrete and vigorous. First of all, in a passage commonly ignored by his commentators, he condemned the narrowly-confined study of any one nationality or culture. In keeping with his principle that the pursuit of science is superior to the pursuit of any kind of limited lore or tradition, he affirmed "that men who study any universal science . . . obtain thereby a larger share of philanthropy than those who only study national arts and improvements."<sup>9</sup>

In his own education, Paine tells us, he did not learn Latin at the grammar school he attended, not only because he "had no inclination to learn languages," but because of an objection he attributed to the Quakers to the book in which the language was taught. Despite the natural bent of his mind to science, he still became, however, "acquainted with the subjects of all the Latin books used in the school."<sup>10</sup> As an adult, Paine objected to making the study of the classical languages the basis of the curriculum. "Learning," he affirmed, "does not consist, as the schools now make it consist, in the knowledge of languages, but in the knowledge of things to which language gives names."<sup>11</sup> The Greeks, Paine acknowledged, were the first scientists, and it thus became necessary for all other peoples to learn their language as a tool. "The study, therefore, of the Greek language (and in the same manner for the Latin) was no other than the drudgery business of a linguist." But by Paine's day, all the useful books had already been translated, and he argued that the classical languages had therefore become "useless, and the time expended in teaching and learning them . . . wasted." The child in the traditional school, Paine argued, has "its genius . . . killed by the barren study of a dead language, and the philosopher

<sup>8</sup> I, 543

<sup>9</sup> I, 164

<sup>10</sup> I, 496

<sup>11</sup> I, 491

. . . lost in the linguist.” Paine consequently proposed that the study of the dead languages be abolished and learning be made to consist, “as it originally did, in scientific knowledge.” He repudiated the defense then sometimes made, that dead languages were taught at a time in the child’s development when he was incapable of “exerting any other mental faculty than that of memory,” by asserting that the child’s mind has “a natural disposition” to experiment and to acquire the rudiments of scientific knowledge.

In Paine’s opinion, the religious establishment had imposed the study of dead languages in order to preserve the system of Christian dogma and to prevent its falsehood being exposed through the discovery of new scientific knowledge. “It became necessary to their purpose,” he accused, “to cut learning down to a size less dangerous . . . , and this they effected by restricting the idea of learning to the dead study of dead language.”<sup>12</sup> This does not sound much like a man imbued with the classical spirit.

Paine was by no means alone in his milieu—even among the literary great—in questioning the value of classical training. His idol, Benjamin Franklin, who had once recommended Paine as a schoolmaster, had as early as 1751 proposed the organization of an exclusively English School in Philadelphia where no languages of any kind other than English would be required. And in separate proposals for a more orthodox institution, which eventually became the University of Pennsylvania, Franklin recommended that “all should not be compell’d to learn *Latin, Greek*, or the modern foreign Languages; yet none that have an ardent Desire to learn them should be refused.”<sup>13</sup> Later in the last years of Franklin’s life—the period when Paine frequently visited him in Philadelphia—Franklin explained his aversion to Greek and Latin. He actually called them “the quackery of literature,”<sup>14</sup> and he characterized them as the “*Chapeau bras* of modern literature,” that is, they resembled the hats which people of the European courts carried under their arms as a pure ornament since they could make no use of them on their heads for fear of discomposing their wigs and headdresses.<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Rush expressed similar reservations in *Observations upon the Study of the Latin and Greek Languages* (1789), and scores of

<sup>12</sup> I, 483

<sup>13</sup> *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, eds. Leonard W. Labaree *et al.* (New Haven, 1961), III, 415.

<sup>14</sup> “Papers of Dr. Benjamin Rush,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XXIX, 15-30.

<sup>15</sup> *Writings* ed. Albert Henry Smith (New York, 1907), X, 31.

other pamphlets and periodical essays in this decade carried on the debate. There was a strong tendency among many people in the Federal period to regard the classical languages as nothing but elegant and useless adornments, and Paine's attitude reflects this view and was conditioned by it.

We may discover a second and even stronger motive, however, for his opposition to the languages he described as dead, and this is his deistical opinion that they were being used by priests as a means of keeping the human intellect in bondage. The leaders of organized religion, he charged, restricted learning to Latin and Greek out of a fear that scientific knowledge would call in question the truth of Christian doctrine. Like most thinkers of the Enlightenment, Paine condemned scholasticism, and he saw a parallel between Latin scholarship, and superstition and intellectual bigotry.

Just as Paine was not alone in opposing the classics on pedagogical grounds, he was not alone in opposing them on the general grounds of Enlightenment philosophy. As an example, I shall cite one of Paine's South American admirers, Camilo Henríquez, a deistical Catholic priest who in 1812 argued in a notable essay "On the Influence of Enlightenment Writings on the Fate of Humanity," that the ancient languages had been the principal deterrents to the spreading of knowledge in the world. "The Enlightenment must become a movement of the people," Henríquez maintained, "but ancient institutions had a quite contrary effect upon the diffusion of Enlightenment. Treating sciences in Latin is the major obstacle which can be offered not only to its diffusion, but also to its perfection. . . . The method of scholasticism, the system of studies of the schools, the obstacles which the popularization of useful books has encountered, have had an enormous influence in the backwardness of letters."<sup>16</sup> Henríquez believed that in contrast to the Dark Ages of the fifth to the ninth centuries, human reason in the modern world should devote itself to the exact sciences, "sciences which accustom the understanding to method, seek proofs, and communicate solidity and profundity."

Since Paine is famous for his literary works attacking tradition in politics and in religion, it should come as no surprise that he should also oppose an unquestioning respect for the traditions of

<sup>16</sup> Translated from "De la influencia de los escritos luminosos sobre la suerte de la humanidad," in *Escritos Políticos de Camilo Henríquez* ed. Raúl Silva Castro (Santiago, Chile, 1960), pp. 79-81. See also A. Owen Aldridge, "Camilo Henríquez and the Fame of Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin in Chile," *Inter-American Review of Bibliography*, XVII (1967), 51-67.

Greece and Rome. One of the purposes of his *Crisis* papers was to bolster morale by giving the people of America a high opinion of themselves. "I have no notion," he affirmed, "of yielding the palm of the United States to any Grecians or Romans that were ever born."<sup>17</sup> In reference to the compliments commonly paid to "ancient histories and transactions" and the practice of holding up as objects of excellence and imitation "the wisdom, civil governments, and sense of honor of the states of Greece and Rome," Paine objected that "Mankind have lived to very little purpose, if, at this period of the world, they must go two or three thousand years back for lessons and examples. We do great injustice to ourselves by placing them in such a superior line."<sup>18</sup> "Could the mist of antiquity be cleared away," Paine continued, "and men and things be viewed as they really were, it is more than probable that they would admire us, rather than we them." According to Paine, the ancients "were strongly possessed of the *spirit* of liberty but *not the principle*," for although "they were determined not to be slaves themselves, they employed their power to enslave the rest of mankind." Elsewhere in reference to freedom as a symbol of the American Revolution, he wrote: "If the ancients ever possessed her in a civil state, it is a question well worth enquiring into, whether they did not lose her through the bolts, bars, and checks under which they thought to keep her?"<sup>19</sup> In *Crisis* No. 7 he strongly suggested that in religion and morality the ancient civilizations were greatly inferior to the modern. "As individuals we profess ourselves Christians," he wrote, "but as nations we are heathens, Romans, and what not."

As part of his effort to discredit Edmund Burke's principle of prescription or, basing society upon precedents drawn from antiquity, Paine further called into question a blind respect for the remote past. "If the mere name of antiquity is to govern in the affairs of life," he argued, "the people who are to live an hundred or a thousand years hence, may as well take us for a precedent, as we make a precedent of those who lived an hundred or a thousand years ago."<sup>20</sup> In the dispute between ancients and moderns, Paine was unequivocally a modern. The only value of studying government in the ancient world, he alleged, is "to make a proper use of the errors or the improvements which the history of its presents. Those who

<sup>17</sup> I, 124

<sup>18</sup> I, 123

<sup>19</sup> II, 284

<sup>20</sup> I, 273

lived a hundred or a thousand years ago, were then moderns as we are now.”<sup>21</sup> Here Paine is actually using a traditional argument derived from Bacon and Edward Young. Bacon had made popular the paradox: *Antiquitas saeculi juventus mundi*. “These times are the ancient time, when the world is ancient and not those which we account *ordine retrogrado* by a computation backward from ourselves.”<sup>22</sup> Paine was certainly not aware of the works of his thought predecessors, but probably picked up their notions in his various literary conversations.

In *Crisis* No. 13, Paine contrasted the fair origin of America with the dishonorable career of Rome, which “once the proud mistress of the universe, was originally a band of ruffians. Plunder and rapine made her rich, and her oppression of millions made her great.”<sup>23</sup> In his *Letter to the Abbé Raynal*, Paine affirmed “that ‘The Alexanders and Caesars of antiquity have left behind them their monuments of destruction, and are remembered with hatred. . . . Of more use was *one* philosopher, though a heathen, to the world, than all the heathen conquerors that ever existed.’”<sup>24</sup> In the same work Paine expressed the naive theory that “The idea of conquering countries, like the Greeks and Romans, does not now exist; and experience has exploded the notion of going to war for the sake of profit.”

It could be argued perhaps that Paine’s objections to antiquity are purely political and that from the literary point of view he is much less committed to the side of the moderns. This argument might be presented, of course, but it is completely invalid and contrary to fact. In one of Paine’s very first published works, written several months even before *Common Sense*, he presented exactly the same reasoning concerning the ancient and modern controversy in literature which he later used against Burke in a political sense. In his introductory essay as editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, January, 1775, he affirmed that “to suppose that arts and sciences are exhausted subjects, is doing them a kind of dishonor.” “I cannot believe,” he continued, “that this species of vanity is peculiar to the present age only. I have no doubt but that it existed before the flood, and even in the wildest ages of antiquity. . . . That ‘*We*

<sup>21</sup> I, 273

<sup>22</sup> *Works of Francis Bacon*, eds. Spedding, Ellis, and Heath, IV, 82. See also Richard F. Jones, “Science and Criticism in the Neo-Classical Age of English Literature,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, I (Oct., 1940), 405.

<sup>23</sup> I, 231

<sup>24</sup> II, 256

*have found out everything,*' has been the motto of every age. Let our ideas travel a little into antiquity, and we shall find larger portions of it than now. . . . Our fancies would be highly diverted could we look back, and behold a circle of original Indians haranguing on the sublime perfection of the age."<sup>25</sup>

Jonathan Swift's famous "Apologue of the Spider and the Bee" helps us to see exactly how strongly Paine opposed the presuppositions of the classicists. Swift compared the moderns to spiders who spin out cobwebs from their own entrails and the ancients to bees, who manufacture nectar from the flowers and blossoms of the field and garden: the moderns in literature depend on their own native stock and genius, whereas the ancients range through the great works of the past for inspiration and quotations. In this light, Paine is decidedly an anti-classicist. Throughout his life he insisted that he read very little in the works of other authors, and he is almost unique in his century in never using an epigraph or a purely literary quotation. In *the Rights of Man*, he roundly declared, "I followed exactly what my heart dictated. I neither read books, nor studied other people's opinions. I thought for myself."<sup>26</sup>

The eighteenth century is considered to be the century of classicism and of the Enlightenment, and ordinarily the ideals of the two are considered to be complementary or at least compatible. A. O. Lovejoy, for example, has brilliantly demonstrated a parallel between deism and classicism. In the thought of Shaftesbury in the first part of the eighteenth century, the two strands of thought blend perfectly. Paine's kind of classicism, however, consists chiefly in the use of couplets and personifications in poetry.

The Enlightenment emphasis on social and scientific advancement obviously reflects a belief in progress, a dedication to the future; classicism, on the other hand, immersed in the traditions of Greece and Rome, looks with nostalgia to the past. In the battle of the ancients and moderns, embracing both science and literature, the dedicated classicist had no choice but to enlist himself on the side of the ancients. Yet the average eighteenth-century rationalist accepted the esthetic presuppositions of classicism and the social ones of the Enlightenment without recognizing any need for reconciling their diverse perspectives. He considered the laws of esthetic excellence as parallel to the laws of nature, or, more precisely, part of them.

<sup>25</sup> II, 110-111

<sup>26</sup> I, 406

A Platonist like Shaftesbury would be likely to hold that esthetic laws are comparable to scientific laws. And the literal-minded deist Paine shared this assumption even though he expressed himself in quite different terms. To him, nothing was as beautiful as an iron bridge he had invented except "a woman." Shaftesbury reflected the Enlightenment philosophy in almost every respect except for failing to express the doctrine of progress, probably because of his great dedication to the example of the ancients. It is precisely this classical reverence which is missing from Paine, replaced as it is by a faith in social progress and the glorious future of science.

On the basis of the evidence so far presented, we are now in a position to decide whether Paine was pro- or anti-classical. Without doubt he used in his writing a number of Latin tags and referred to the stock heroes and philosophers of Greek and Roman times. But so did virtually every other writer of the eighteenth century in England and America. Much of the material which can be cited to prove Paine's adherence to classical goals consists of references to events in history. There is no question that Paine was a writer of history or that he considered his works on the American and French Revolutions as belonging to this category. In *Crisis* No. 3, he wrote: "It is pleasant and sometimes useful to look back, even to the first periods of infancy, and trace the turns and windings through which we have passed, so we may likewise derive many advantages by halting a while in our political career, and taking a review of the wondrous complicated labyrinth of little more than yesterday."<sup>27</sup> But a fondness for history is not classicism. In any strict sense of the word, classicism has little to do with a superficial knowledge of Greek and Latin chronology or the ability to use clichés and refer to great men of the past. The word more properly refers to an intense interest in the literary and philosophical works produced by ancient Greece and Rome and to a reading of these works. Paine never professed to have read even translations of any of the ancient writers he mentions—not even Plato or Aristotle, and it is almost certain that he never did read any part of them. All he ever claimed was a knowledge of the subject matter of the Latin books used in grammar schools.

Paine had absolutely no reverence for antiquity or for the artistic masterpieces of Greece and Rome. He was a modern in the literary sense of the word, which implies complete absence of inspiration

<sup>27</sup> I, 74

from the classical tradition. Also he vigorously opposed the teaching of Greek and Latin on the grounds that these languages are useless ornaments and that they hinder the development of science and enlightenment.

We may admire Paine as much as we wish for his independent thought and courage, for his luminous prose style, and for his practical contributions to the American and French Revolutions. But there is no use in trying to make him into a classicist in any sense of the word, for he is not.

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