

Excerpts from
"Tirocinium", or

A Review of

Schools

1784

by William Cowper,

writer of the hymn,
"There Is A Fountain Filled With Blood"
and friend of John Newton,
writer of the hymn, "Amazing Grace"

In your hands is a selection of excerpts from one man's controversial appraisal of the state of schools, written in 1784. Though separated from his time by centuries, modern readers may find striking similarities between his concerns and what many today are identifying as problems with schools.

If readers do find similarities between the state of schools of 1784 and those of today, they are forced to consider the possibility that the root issue is not just the symptoms, but an inherent flaw in the very nature of the institution.

How well we would do to consider the implications of God's Word:

*He that walketh with wise men shall be wise:
but a **companion of fools** shall be destroyed.* (Proverbs 13:20)

***The disciple is not above his master;
but every one that is perfect
shall be as his master.*** (Luke 6:40)

About the poem...

In 1784, William Cowper wrote to his friend, William Unwin, with advice on the education of Unwin's son, in the form of this poem, "Tirocinium, or, A Review of Schools," in which he speaks of "the scandalous relaxation of discipline... in almost all schools universally," and "[calls] upon fathers to become tutors to their own sons."

We here present an abridgement, and have added headings, footnotes and occasionally **emphasis**. We invite you to view the poem in its entirety at <http://tinyurl.com/tirocinium1>.

Excerpts from

A Review of Schools

*But I am mistaken if "Tirocinium"
do not make some of my friends angry,
and procure me enemies not a few.*

-- William Cowper

AM I THEREFORE BECOME YOUR ENEMY,
BECAUSE I TELL YOU THE TRUTH?
GALATIANS 4:16

*On the tendency within Education to major
on the minors: neglecting the eternal and
instead focusing on the less important.*

**Truths that the learn'd pursue with eager thought
Are not important always as dear-bought,
Proving at last, though told in pompous strains,
A childish waste of philosophic pains;
But truths on which depends our main concern,
That 'tis our shame and misery not to learn,
Shine by the side of every path we tread
With such a lustre, he that runs may read.**

'Tis true that, if to trifle life away
Down to the sunset of their latest day,
Then perish on futurity's¹ wide shore
Like fleeting exhalations, found no more,
Were all that Heaven required of human kind,
And all the plan their destiny design'd,
What none could reverence all might justly blame,
And man would breathe but for his Maker's shame.
But reason heard, and nature well perused,
At once the dreaming mind is disabused².

1 The future.

2 That is, freed from falsehood.

*That, as Man is the crown of the Creation,
he is under obligation to direct his Children in
the ways of the Creator.*

If all we find possessing earth, sea, air,
Reflect His attributes who placed them there,
Fulfil the purpose, and appear design'd
Proofs of the wisdom of the all-seeing mind,
'Tis plain the creature, whom he chose to invest
With kingship and dominion o'er the rest,
Received his nobler nature, and was made
Fit for the power in which he stands array'd;
That first, or last, hereafter, if not here,
He too might make his author's wisdom clear,
Praise him on earth, or, obstinately dumb,
Suffer his justice in a world to come.
This once believed, 'twere logic misapplied
To prove a consequence by none denied,
**That we are bound to cast the minds of youth
Betimes³ into the mold of heavenly truth,
That taught of God they may indeed be wise,
Nor ignorantly wandering miss the skies.**

3 Early.

*The importance of teaching Children from
earliest days that which is carefully selected by
Parents to nurture them in Matters of
eternal benefit.*

In early days the conscience has in most

A quickness, which in later life is lost:⁴

Preserved from guilt by salutary⁵ fears,

Or guilty, soon relenting into tears.

Too careless often, as our years proceed,

What friends we sort with, or what books we read,⁶

Our parents yet exert a prudent care

To feed our infant minds with proper fare;

And wisely store the nursery by degrees

With wholesome learning, yet acquired with ease.

Neatly secured from being soil'd or torn

Beneath a pane of thin translucent horn,

A book (to please us at a tender age

'Tis call'd a book, though but a single page)⁷

4 Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old he will not depart from it." 2 Timothy 3:15: "And that from a child thou hast known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus."

5 Beneficial.

6 "There is, I should say, a very serious error involved in a Christian parent's committing the training of his children to unconverted persons, or even to those whose hearts are not one with him as to separation from the world. It is natural that a child should look up to, and follow, the example of, one who has the training and management of him...The same principle applies to the reading of books. A book is decidedly a silent teacher and former of the mind and character; if I am called to look well to the character and the principles of the living teacher, I am equally so to look to those of the silent teacher. I am quite convinced that in reference both to books and teachers we need to have our consciences stirred and instructed." C.H. Mackintosh (1820-1896)

7 This refers to the "children's books" of the day: a page covered with a sheet

Presents the prayer the Saviour deign'd to teach,
Which children use, and parsons—when they preach.
Lispings our syllables, we scramble next
Through moral narrative, or sacred text;
And learn with wonder how this world began,
Who made, who marr'd, and who has ransom'd man:
Points which, unless the Scripture made them plain,
The wisest heads might agitate in vain.
O thou, whom, borne on fancy's eager wing
Back to the season of life's happy spring,
I pleased remember, and, while memory yet
Holds fast her office here, can ne'er forget;
Ingenious dreamer, in whose well-told tale⁸
Sweet fiction and sweet truth alike prevail;
Whose humorous vein, strong sense, and simple style,
May teach the gayest, make the gravest smile;
Witty, and well employ'd, and, like thy Lord,
Speaking in parables his slighted word;
I name thee not,⁹ lest so despised a name
Should move a sneer at thy deserved fame;
Yet e'en in transitory life's late day,
That mingles all my brown with sober grey,
Revere the man whose PILGRIM marks the road,
And guides the PROGRESS of the soul to God.

of horn (as clear plastic).

8 *Pilgrim's Progress*.

9 But we do: John Bunyan. The same was “sneered” at by the educated of his day, who balked at the idea that a mere tinker, **uneducated**, could produce such compelling literature. Bunyan was accused of plagiarism for his timeless, bestselling allegory, but his detractors failed to take into account that he read almost nothing except for the Bible, and was unable to read Latin (thereby to plagiarize Dante's *Inferno* as he was accused of doing)! See Acts 4:13.

*That the influence had on a Man of those
Books he read while Small is forgotten in the
Light of what he is later taught at School.*

‘Twere well with most, if books that could engage
Their childhood pleased them at a riper age;
**The man, approving what had charm’d the boy,
Would die at last in comfort, peace, and joy,
And not with curses on his heart, who stole
The gem of truth from his unguarded soul.
The stamp of artless piety impress’d
By kind tuition on his yielding breast,
The youth, now bearded and yet pert¹⁰ and raw,
Regards with scorn, though once received with awe;
And, warp’d into the labyrinth of lies,
That babblers, call’d philosophers, devise,
Blasphemes his creed, as founded on a plan**
Replete with dreams, unworthy of a man....
Time was, he closed as he began the day,
With decent duty, not ashamed to pray;
The practice was a bond upon his heart,
A pledge he gave for a consistent part;
Nor could he dare presumptuously displease
A power confess’d so lately on his knees.
But now farewell all legendary tales,
The shadows fly, philosophy prevails;...
And thus, well tutor’d only while we share
A mother’s lectures and a nurse’s care;
**And taught at schools much mythologic stuff,
But sound religion sparingly enough;
Our early notices of truth disgraced,
Soon lose their credit, and are all effaced.**

10 Inappropriately playful.

*That public Schools encourage public Folly;
further, how that those younger in a School
look up to those Worse than themselves.*

Would you your son should be a sot¹¹ or dunce,
Lascivious, headstrong, or all these at once;
That in good time the stripling's¹² finish'd taste
For loose expense and fashionable waste
Should prove your ruin, and his own at last;
Train him in public with a mob of boys,
Childish in mischief only and in noise,
Else of a mannish growth, and five in ten
In infidelity and lewdness men.

There shall he learn, ere sixteen winters old,
That authors are most useful pawn'd or sold;
That pedantry¹³ is all that schools impart,
But taverns teach the knowledge of the heart;
There waiter Dick, with bacchanalian¹⁴ lays,
Shall win his heart, and have his drunken praise,
His counsellor and bosom friend shall prove,
And some street-pacing harlot his first love.
Schools, unless discipline were doubly strong,
Detain their adolescent charge too long;

**The management of tyros¹⁵ of eighteen
Is difficult, their punishment obscene.
The stout tall captain, whose superior size
The minor heroes view with envious eyes,
Becomes their pattern,¹⁶ upon whom they fix
Their whole attention, and ape all his tricks.**

11 Drunkard.

12 Lad.

13 The ostentatious display of learning.

14 Riotously drunken.

15 Novices. The title of this poem, "Tirocinium," is based on this word.

16 Most of the pupils desire to imitate the most admired, with all of his vices.

His pride, that scorns to obey or to submit,
With them is courage; his effrontery wit.
His wild excursions, window-breaking feats,
Robbery of gardens, quarrels in the streets,
His hairbreadth ‘scapes,¹⁷ and all his daring schemes,
Transport them, and are made their favourite themes.
In little bosoms such achievements strike
A kindred spark: they burn to do the like.
 Thus, half accomplish’d ere he yet begin
 To show the peeping down upon his chin;
 And, as maturity of years comes on,
 Made just the adept that you design’d your son;
To ensure the perseverance of his course,
 And give your monstrous project all its force,
Send him to college. If he there be tamed,
 Or in one article of vice reclaim’d,
 Where no regard of ordinances is shown
 Or look’d for now, the fault must be his own.
 Some sneaking virtue lurks in him, no doubt,
 Where neither strumpets¹⁸ charms, nor drinking bout,
 Nor gambling practices can find it out.
Such youths of spirit, and that spirit too,
Ye nurseries of our boys, we owe to you¹⁹:
Though from ourselves the mischief more proceeds,
For public schools ‘tis public folly feeds.
 The slaves of custom²⁰ and establish’d mode,
 With packhorse constancy we keep the road,
 Crooked or straight, through quags²¹ or thorny dells,
 True to the jingling of our leader’s bells.²²

17 Escapes.

18 Harlots.

19 Here he speaks of what we now call “peer pressure.”

20 Those who fear to be out of step with what is popular.

21 Bogs.

22 This may refer to the behavior of herd animals.

*Those Teachers who intend well are up against
too great a Task, and the result is the decline of
their Students, especially in character.*

To follow foolish precedents, and wink
With both our eyes, is easier than to think;
And such an age as ours balks no expense,
Except of caution and of common sense;
Else sure notorious fact, and proof so plain,
Would turn our steps into a wiser train.
I blame not those²³ who, with what care they can,
O'erwatch the numerous and unruly clan;²⁴
**Or, if I blame, 'tis only that they dare
Promise a work of which they must despair.
Have ye, ye sage intendants of the whole,
A ubiquarian²⁵ presence and control,
Elisha's eye, that, when Gehazi stray'd,
Went with him, and saw all the game he play'd?²⁶**
Yes—ye are conscious; and on all the shelves
Your pupils strike upon have struck yourselves.
Or if, by nature sober, ye had then,
Boys as ye were, the gravity of men,
Ye knew at least, by constant proofs address'd
To ears and eyes, the vices of the rest.
**But ye connive at what ye cannot cure,
And evils not to be endured endure,
Lest power exerted, but without success,
Should make the little ye retain still less.**

²³ The teachers.

²⁴ The students.

²⁵ Omnipresent.

²⁶ Referring to 2 Kings 5:20-27. That is, the blame he places is at those who would claim the ability to have an omnipresent eye sufficient for the degree of supervision necessary in the schools.

*Of Fathers who send Children to school
wishing for them the same Folly, which though
full of risk, is what they fondly recall.*

...Be it a weakness, it deserves some praise:
We love the play-place of our early days;...
The pleasing spectacle at once excites
Such recollection of our own delights,
That, viewing it, we seem almost to obtain
Our innocent sweet simple years again.
This fond attachment to the well-known place,
Whence first we started into life's long race,
Maintains its hold with such unfailing sway,
We feel it e'en in age, and at our latest day.
Hark! how the sire of chits,²⁷ whose future share
Of classic food begins to be his care,
With his own likeness placed on either knee,
Indulges all a father's heartfelt glee;
And tells them, as he strokes their silver locks,
That they must soon learn Latin, and to box;
Then turning, he regales²⁸ his listening wife
With all the adventures of his early life;
His skill in coachmanship, or driving chaise,
In bilking tavern-bills, and spouting plays;
What shifts he used, detected in a scrape,
How he was flogg'd, or had the luck to escape;
What sums he lost at play, and how he sold
Watch, seals, and all—till all his pranks are told.
**Retracing thus his frolics ('tis a name
That palliates²⁹ deeds of folly and of shame)³⁰,**

27 Father of children.

28 Entertains.

29 Lessens the seriousness of.

30 That is, the father may remember with fondness the mischievous fun of his school days, and wish his child to enjoy the same, though it is sin.

He gives the local bias all its sway;
 Resolves that where he play'd his sons shall play,
 And destines their bright genius to be shown
 Just in the scene where he display'd his own.
**The meek and bashful boy will soon be taught
 To be as bold and forward as he ought;³¹**
 The rude will scuffle through with ease enough,
 Great schools suit best the sturdy and the rough.
 Ah, happy designation, prudent choice,
 The event is sure; expect it, and rejoice!
 Soon see your wish fulfill'd in either child,
 The pert³² made perter, and the tame made wild.
 The great indeed, by titles, riches, birth,
 Excused the incumbrance of more solid worth,
 Are best disposed of where with most success
 They may acquire that confident address,
 Those habits of profuse and lewd expense,
 That scorn of all delights but those of sense,
 Which, though in plain plebeians³³ we condemn,
 With so much reason, all expect from them.
**But families of less illustrious fame,
 Whose chief distinction is their spotless name,
 Whose heirs, their honours none, their income small,
 Must shine by true desert, or not at all,
 What dream they of, that, with so little care
 They risk their hopes, their dearest treasure, there?³⁴**

31 James 4:6: "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble."

32 Inappropriately playful.

³³ Common or vulgar people.

34 That is, what are those parents thinking who have no riches except in their good name, if they risk their dearest treasure (i.e. their children) by submitting them to the pollutions of the schools? Proverbs 22:1: "A GOOD name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold." Mark 8:36: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

*Asked: Why would a Father would assign
a Stranger to do for his Child what is so
obviously fitting for the Father to do?*

Oh! 'tis a sight to be with joy perused,
By all whom sentiment has not abused;
New-fangled sentiment, the boasted grace
Of those who never feel in the right place;
A father blest with an ingenuous son,
Father, and friend, and tutor, all in one.
How!—turn again to tales long since forgot,
Aesop, and Phaedrus, and the rest?—Why not?
He will not blush, that has a father's heart,
To take in childish plays a childish part;
But bends his sturdy back to any toy
That youth takes pleasure in, to please his boy:
**Then why resign into a stranger's hand
A task as much within your own command,
That God and nature, and your interest too,
Seem with one voice to delegate to you?
Why hire a lodging in a house unknown
For one whose tenderest thoughts all hover round your own?**

*That the Child may find Home less desirable
than School, and become alienated from
Parents and seek Reasons to be absent.*

**This second weaning,³⁵ needless as it is,
How does it lacerate both your heart and his!**
The indented stick, that loses day by day,
Notch after notch, till all are smoothed away,
Bears witness, long ere his dismissal come,
With what intense desire he wants his home.
**But though the joys he hopes beneath your roof
Bid fair enough to answer in the proof,
Harmless, and safe, and natural, as they are,
A disappointment waits him even there:
Arrived, he feels an unexpected change;
He blushes, hangs his head, is shy and strange
No longer takes, as once, with fearless ease,
His favourite stand between his father's knees,
But seeks the corner of some distant seat,
And eyes the door, and watches a retreat,
And, least familiar where he should be most,
Feels all his happiest privileges lost.
Alas, poor boy!—the natural effect
Of love by absence chill'd into respect.**
Say, what accomplishments, at school acquired,
Brings he, to sweeten fruits so undesired?
**Thou well deserv'st an alienated son,
Unless thy conscious heart acknowledge—none;³⁶**

35 That is, the premature separation of a child from his parents' protection and influence (spiritual feeding). Proverbs 23:26: "My son, give me thine heart, and let thine eyes observe my ways."

36 Is there any worthy accomplishment the child has gained in school which is worth the loss of affection towards his parents? Answer: none.

Of the need of parental Guidance

Like caterpillars, dangling under trees
By slender threads, and swinging in the breeze...
So numerous are the follies that annoy
The mind and heart of every sprightly boy;
Imaginations noxious and perverse,
Which admonition can alone disperse.
The encroaching nuisance asks a faithful hand,
Patient, affectionate, of high command,
To check the procreation of a breed
Sure to exhaust the plant on which they feed.
'Tis not enough that Greek or Roman page,
At stated hours, his freakish thoughts engage;
**E'en in his pastimes he requires a friend
To warn, and teach him safely to unbend;
O'er all his pleasures gently to preside,
Watch his emotions, and control their tide;
And levying thus, and with an easy sway,
A tax of profit from his very play,
To impress a value, not to be erased,
On moments squander'd else, and running all to waste.**
And seems it nothing in a father's eye
That unimproved those many moments fly?
And is he well content his son should find
No nourishment to feed his growing mind,
But conjugated verbs and nouns declined?
**For such is all the mental food purvey'd
By public hackneys³⁷ in the schooling trade;
Who feed a pupil's intellect with store
Of syntax truly, but with little more;
Dismiss their cares when they dismiss their flock,
Machines themselves, and govern'd by a clock.³⁸**

³⁷ A hireling, a drudge.

³⁸ The teacher's concern for students is not the same degree as that of a loving parent, and ends when the class is dismissed. "The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep." John 10:13

*That a Father with even a small intellect may
do better than the Schools in merely pointing
his Child to the handiwork of God*

**Perhaps a father, blest with any brains,
Would deem it no abuse, or waste of pains,
To improve this diet, at no great expense,
With savoury truth and wholesome common sense;
To lead his son, for prospects of delight,
To some not steep, though philosophic, height,
Thence to exhibit to his wondering eyes
Yon circling worlds, their distance and their size,
The moons of Jove, and Saturn's belted ball,
And the harmonious order of them all;
To show him in an insect or a flower
Such microscopic proof of skill and power
As, hid from ages past, God now displays
To combat atheists with in modern days;...
And, more than all, with commendation due,
To set some living worthy in his view,
Whose fair example may at once inspire
A wish to copy what he must admire.**
Such knowledge, gain'd betimes, and which appears,
Though solid, not too weighty for his years,
Sweet in itself, and not forbidding sport,
When health demands it, of athletic sort,
Would make him—what some lovely boys have been,
And more than one perhaps that I have seen—
An evidence and reprehension both
Of the mere schoolboy's lean and tardy growth.

*His prediction that
some that will not heed his Advice.*

...But whom do I advise? the fashion-led,
The incorrigibly wrong, the deaf, the dead!
Whom care and cool deliberation suit
Not better much than spectacles a brute;
Who if their sons some slight tuition share,
Deem it of no great moment whose, or where;
Too proud to adopt the thoughts of one unknown,
And much too gay to have any of their own.
“But courage, man!” methought the Muse replied,
“Mankind are various, and the world is wide:
**The ostrich, silliest of the feather’d kind,
And form’d of God without a parent’s mind,
Commits her eggs, incautious, to the dust,
Forgetful that the foot may crush the trust;
And, while on public nurseries they rely,
Not knowing, and too oft not caring, why,
Irrational in what they thus prefer,
No few, that would seem wise, resemble her.**
But all are not alike. Thy warning voice
May here and there prevent erroneous choice;
**And some perhaps, who, busy as they are,
Yet make their progeny their dearest care
(Whose hearts will ache, once told what ills may reach
Their offspring, left upon so wild a beach),
Will need no stress of argument to enforce
The expedience of a less adventurous course:**
The rest will slight thy counsel, or condemn;
But they have human feelings—turn to them.”

*That Parents look upon the normal results of
the Schools and consider what is likely to
become of their Children.*

**Look round you on a world perversely blind;
See what contempt is fallen on human kind;
See wealth abused, and dignities misplaced,
Great titles, offices, and trusts disgraced,
Long lines of ancestry, renown'd of old,
Their noble qualities all quench'd and cold;...
See womanhood despised, and manhood shamed
With infamy too nauseous to be named,
Fops³⁹ at all corners, ladylike in mien,⁴⁰
Civeted⁴¹ fellows, smelt ere they are seen,
Else coarse and rude in manners, and their tongue
On fire with curses, and with nonsense hung,
Now flush'd with drunkenness, now with bunnydom⁴² pale,
Their breath a sample of last night's regale;
**See volunteers in all the vilest arts,
Men well endow'd, of honourable parts,⁴³
Design'd by Nature wise, but self-made fools;
All these, and more like these, were bred at schools.**
*And if it chance, as sometimes chance it will,
That though school-bred the boy be virtuous still;
Such rare exceptions, shining in the dark,
Prove, rather than impeach, the just remark:
As here and there a twinkling star descried
Serves but to show how black is all beside.*⁴⁴**

39 One much concerned with *dress and appearance*.

40 Conduct.

41 Perfumed.

42 Debauchery.

43 Abilities.

⁴⁴ The rare exception of a virtuous son emerging from the schools is seen as so unusual, it proves the danger of parents entrusting their children to it.

*His hopes that those more caring Parents
may be persuaded to take his Advice.*

Now look on him, whose very voice in tone
Just echoes thine, whose features are thine own...
**And say, "My boy, the unwelcome hour is come,
When thou, transplanted from thy genial⁴⁵ home,
Must find a colder soil and bleaker air,
And trust for safety to a stranger's care;
What character, what turn thou wilt assume
From constant converse with I know not whom;
Who there will court thy friendship, with what views,
And, artless as thou art, whom thou wilt choose;**
Though much depends on what thy choice shall be,
Is all chance-medley, and unknown to me."
Canst thou, the tear just trembling on thy lids,
And while the dreadful risk foreseen forbids;
Free too, and under no constraining force,
Unless the sway of custom warp thy course;⁴⁶
Lay such a stake upon the losing side,
Merely to gratify so blind a guide?
Thou canst not! Nature, pulling at thine heart,
Condemns the unfatherly, the imprudent part.
Thou wouldst not, deaf to Nature's tenderest plea,
Turn him adrift upon a rolling sea⁴⁷,
Nor say, Go thither, conscious that there lay
A brood of asps, or quicksands in his way;
**Then, only govern'd by the self-same rule
Of natural pity, send him not to school.**

45 Cheerful; friendly.

46 That is, there was no law requiring children to be sent to school; the only force pressuring parents to put children in the risky environment of schools would be "the sway of custom", not wanting to appear different, doing what is in fashion.

47 Ephesians 4:14

*Of the Reward or Consolation of Parents
who protect their Child from School.*

No—guard him better. Is he not thine own,

Thyself in miniature, thy flesh, thy bone?

And hopest thou not ('tis every father's hope)

That, since thy strength must with thy years elope,

And thou wilt need some comfort to assuage

Health's last farewell, a staff of thine old age,

That then, in recompence of all thy cares,

Thy child shall show respect to thy grey hairs,

Befriend thee, of all other friends bereft,

And give thy life its only cordial left?

Aware then how much danger intervenes,

To compass that good end, forecast the means.

His heart, now passive, yields to thy command;

Secure it thine, its key is in thine hand;

If thou desert thy charge, and throw it wide,

Nor heed what guests there enter and abide,

Complain not if attachments lewd and base

Supplant thee in it and usurp thy place.

But, if thou guard its sacred chambers sure

From vicious inmates and delights impure,

Either his gratitude shall hold him fast,

And keep him warm and filial to the last;

Or, if he prove unkind (as who can say

But, being man, and therefore frail, he may?),

One comfort yet shall cheer thine aged heart,

Howe'er he slight thee,

thou hast done thy part.

MY SON,
GIVE ME THINE
HEART,
AND LET THINE EYES
OBSERVE MY WAYS.

PROVERBS 23:26

*"...I do not know that schools in the gross,
and especially public schools,
have ever been so pointedly condemned
before.*

*But they are become a nuisance, a pest,
an abomination;
and it is fit that
the eyes and noses of mankind
should if possible be opened to perceive it."*

-- William Cowper, 1784

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