

# LETTER

William Pitt (1708–1778), Paymaster of the Forces (1746–1755)

to Thomas Pitt (1737–1793), his nephew

Bath, 14 January 1754

I intended to write to you soon, but I do it the sooner on account of your letter to your aunt, which she transmitted to me.

If anything, my dear boy, could have happened to raise you higher in my esteem and to endear you more to me, it is the abhorrence you feel for the scene of vice and folly, and of real misery and perdition (under the false notion of pleasure and spirit) which has opened to you at your college;<sup>1</sup> and, at the same time, the generous and wise resolution, and true spirit, with which you resisted and repulsed the first attempts upon a mind, I thank God, infinitely too firm and noble, as well as too elegant and enlightened, to be in any danger of yielding to such contemptible and wretched corruptions.

You charm me with the description of Mr. Wheler. Cultivate the acquaintance with him which you have so fortunately begun. In general, be sure to associate with men much older than yourself—scholars, whenever you can—but always with men of decent and honorable lives. As their age and learning, both superior to your own, must necessarily entitle them to deference and to the submission of your own lights to theirs, you will learn that first and greatest rule for pleasing in conversation, as well as for drawing instruction and improvement from the company of superiors in age and knowledge: namely, to be a patient, attentive, and well-bred hearer, and to answer with modesty; to deliver your own opinion sparingly, and with becoming diffidence; to request, when necessary, further information or explanation on any point, with proper apologies for the trouble you give; or, if obliged to differ, to do it with all possible candor, and an unprejudiced desire to find and ascertain truth, with an entire indifference to the side on which that truth is to be found.

Pythagoras enjoined his scholars an absolute silence through a long novitiate. I am far from approving such taciturnity; but I highly recommend the intent of Pythagoras's injunction, which is to dedicate the first parts of life to hear and to learn, in order to collect materials out of which to form well-founded opinions and sound principles, and not to be presuming, prompt, and flippant in hazarding slight, crude notions of things, and by that means expose the nakedness of the mind, like a house opened to company before it is furnished, either with necessaries or with ornaments for their reception and entertainment. And not only will this disgrace follow from such temerity and presumption, but a more serious danger is likely to ensue, which is the embracing of errors for truths, prejudices for principles; and when that is once done, the adhering to them only because one has declared for them; and the submitting, for life, of the understanding and the conscience to a yoke of base and servile notions, vainly taken up and obstinately retained. This will never be your danger; but I thought it not amiss to offer these reflections to your mind.

As to your manner of behaving towards the unhappy young gentlemen you describe, let it be manly and easy; decline their parties with civility; retort their raillery with raillery, always tempered with good breeding. If they banter your regularity, order, decency, and love of study, banter in return the opposite qualities in them; and venture to own, frankly, that you came to Cambridge to learn what you can, not to follow what they call pleasure.

I come now to the part of the advice I have to offer you which most nearly concerns your welfare, and upon which every good and honorable purpose of your life will assuredly turn—I mean the keeping up in your heart true sentiments of religion. If you are not right towards God, you can never be so towards man. The noblest feeling of the human heart is here brought to the test. Is gratitude in the number of a man's virtues? If it is, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Pitt matriculated at Clare College (Cambridge) on 7 January 1754

Highest Benefactor demands the warmest returns of gratitude, love, and praise. If a man wants this virtue, where there are infinite obligations to excite and quicken it, he will be likely to want all offers towards his fellow-creatures, whose utmost gifts are poor, compared to those which he daily receives at the hands of his never-failing almighty friend. “Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth”<sup>2</sup> is a maxim big with the deepest wisdom. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”<sup>3</sup> and “to depart from evil is understanding.”<sup>4</sup> This is eternally true, whether the wits and rakes of Cambridge allow it or not; nay, I must add, of this religious wisdom, “that her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace,”<sup>5</sup> whatever your young gentlemen of pleasure think.

Hold fast, therefore, by this sheet-anchor of happiness, Religion: you will often want it in the times of most danger—the storms and tempests of life. Cherish true religion; shun, with abhorrence and contempt, superstition and enthusiasm. The first is the perfection and glory, the two last are the depravation and disgrace of human nature. Remember the essence of religion is “a heart void of offence towards God and man,”<sup>6</sup> not subtle, speculative opinions, but an active, vital principle of faith.

Go on, my dear child, in the admirable dispositions you have towards all that is right and good. I have neither paper nor words to tell you how tenderly I am yours.

*The Young Man's Book of Classical Letters* (Grigg and Elliot: Philadelphia, 1841):71–74.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:1

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 9:10

<sup>4</sup> Job 28:28

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 3:17

<sup>6</sup> Acts 24:16