

E. J. KENNEY

*All the methods they employed
In those dim and distant years
Of enlightenment were void,
It appears!*

*For the paradigm of Torro, while attractive of its kind,
Is a thing you shouldn't stoop to for the culture of the mind,
And a mastery of grammar*

*Is the lowest and the last
Of the ways to catch the Glamour
Of the Past!*

A. D. GODLEY

I was myself trained as a classical scholar. It seemed the only thing to do with me. I acquired such a singular felicity in handling Latin and Greek that I could take a page of either of them, distinguish which it was by merely glancing at it, and with the help of a dictionary and a pair of compasses, whip off a translation of it in less than three hours.

STEPHEN LEACOCK

I

To what may be called the diagnostic and destructive element in Dr Bolgar's article¹ I have little that I can add. I will, however, venture a qualification. We ought not to allow ourselves to be stampeded by the evident crisis in our affairs into an orgy of more than Chinese self-criticism and self-abasement. Dr Bolgar avoids the exaggerations to which certain assailants of what they like to term the Classical Establishment are prone, but temperate as he is, he at times paints the picture too black. For

¹ R. R. Bolgar, 'A Theory of Classical Education', *Didaskalos* 1 (1969), 5-26.

instance, to write (p. 17) that 'the textual critics had won' is to oversimplify a complex history and to ignore the many important interpretative achievements of nineteenth-century scholars (most of them admittedly not English) on which we are still building today. One must distinguish between what classical scholarship ought to be (and sometimes is) and the thing which its incompetent representatives make it appear to be: as Nietzsche puts it, 'the crucial obstacle in the way of the born classicist is the misrepresentation of classical scholarship by unqualified classicists'.² The days when, as Housman observed, British scholars 'having turned their backs on Europe and science and the past, sat down to banquet on mutual approbation, to produce the Classical Museum and the Bibliotheca Classica, and to perish without a name',³ have left a legend of ineptitude and a legacy of ill-will which we are still expiating and which indeed are visible in Dr Bolgar's article. For it is a sad commentary on the current image of classical studies that he can write (p. 19) of *making* 'the proper understanding of ancient culture and ways of thought... the object of classical learning'; that is what (in theory) it already is and has been since F. A. Wolf defined the classical discipline as 'the knowledge of humanity in antiquity', and that is the common pursuit to which all classical scholars and teachers ought already to be committed. If we are not or are not seen to be, then something is indeed wrong, not with the classics but with the practitioners. I am sure that Dr Bolgar is right in directing attention to the schools, but that does not absolve dons from involvement. Far from it, for it is the Universities which must set the targets and the standards, and it is from the Universities that a lead and a move towards reform must come. However enlightened schools may be, if they find their candidates being rejected by University classical departments in favour of duller but conventionally-trained candidates or - perhaps worse - being accepted and

² Not as profound as it may appear, for it applies to any activity. I quote it to draw attention to the useful collection of Nietzsche's *dicta* made available by W. Arrowsmith, *Arion* II (1969), 5-18.

³ *Manilius*, I, xlii.

then encountering disappointment when they see the intellectual fare provided for them, the consequent discouragement will have disastrous results for the subject.

II

In the somewhat discursive meditation which follows I wish to do no more than touch on some difficulties and rough out some of the changes that I think will have to be considered. Since Latin presents the urgent and more difficult problem, I will confine myself in the main to Latin, and I take as my starting-point Dr Bolgar's conclusion (p. 16): 'In short, when we try to justify a Latin course which has the learning of the language for its aims without reference to the study of literature, the arguments which lie to hand are unconvincing'. This insistence on the study of literature is vital, and this is what must govern the planning of Latin courses all the way through to the University. Dr Bolgar's position is the one at which I had myself – a product, it may not be amiss to note, of an excellent conventional linguistic training (for which I am grateful) – independently arrived, largely as a result of reading and hearing reiterated variations of the stock defence of the study of the classical languages as a mental gymnastic. I am in complete agreement with Dr Bolgar that what we are to aim at is not the study of the Latin language but the imparting of some idea of classical (*i.e.* Greco-Roman) culture and its posterity by the reading of suitable literary texts with close and critical attention in Latin. It is at this point that Dr Bolgar becomes beautifully vague. If the subject is to deserve respect and a reasonably central position in the secondary curriculum, it must be a proper discipline making useful demands on the pupil; and this it will not be unless he or she really learns the language – only with the difference now that the method of learning must be directed towards accurate, fluent and appreciative *reading*, not to mastery of the language as an end in itself. The need for close linguistic study, in other words, will not disappear; what we shall be looking for is a combination of exact *applied* linguistic knowledge (which at the

level of University studies merges into rigorous philological method) with humane and sympathetic appreciation; the first of these things being the only useful means – by useful I mean attended with educational advantage – of attaining the second. This is not the same thing as what Dr M. I. Finley has termed making a fetish of language,⁴ and I do not wish to deny translations their rightful place in classical education. What I am firmly convinced of is that there is no royal road to the study, at any level, of ancient literature.

It is important to be clear about this. One may proportion the tasks to the abilities of one's pupils – some ideas, some books, are easier than others – but there is a point beyond which one cannot and should not wish to go. The classics *are* difficult and there is no use in blinking the fact. But, as Mr D. S. Colman has put it, they are difficult 'with the right kind of difficulty'.⁵ Somehow or other the necessary linguistic detail must be mastered, *insofar as it is relevant*; which is not the same thing as the cramming of masses of arbitrarily arranged facts and inflexions. Accuracy – the right kind of accuracy – will still matter. To quote Mr Colman again: 'I simply do not believe that anyone's interest in the classics was ever killed because he was made to address himself to them with a close regard for accuracy. It was killed by bad teaching, by dull people, and that is a very different matter'.⁶ And by bad books, he might have added: grammar must still be learned, but this need not mean parroting the Latin and Greek verb according to the system of Dionysius Thrax, Apollonius Dyscolus *et tous ces garçons-là*. Some grounding in the elementary principles of linguistics would do most of us no harm. In a word, our basic linguistic teaching must be rethought.

This will all make greatly increased demands on teachers, but those demands are nothing to the demands made by what I described above as humane and sympathetic appreciation. Here

⁴ *The Sunday Times*, 24 March 1963, p. 27.

⁵ D. S. Colman, 'Confessio Grammatici', *Greece and Rome* vii (1960), 73.

⁶ *Art. cit.* 80.

one is brought face to face with the most obvious possible source of weakness in any literary discipline. There are difficulties here which Dr Bolgar may seem to have underrated, as when he writes (p. 25) that 'Children could to some extent be made to understand the values and the interpretation implicit in a particular text, and how these compare with what we think today'. Here is the sort of pronouncement that some find alarming. There is, of course, much virtue in your 'to some extent'; but some may feel that A. D. Godley was more realistic when he wrote: 'If cramming facts is for the most part an unprofitable business, cramming theories is much worse. So with literary criticism: to invite pupils to admire the beauties of great literature is much more educational for the teacher than for his class: it does not really arouse an intelligent interest in most boys. Literary criticism generally goes in at one ear and out at the other, or (what is worse) is remembered and repeated by rote'.⁷ My feeling is that Godley and those who still think like him (they exist: I could instance an eminent classical headmaster) take an unduly gloomy view, coloured no doubt by the generally low standard of much of the literary criticism available for study and emulation in the published works of classical scholars⁸ and by a (consequent) outright misapprehension of what literary criticism is – note Godley's significant phrase, 'to admire the beauties of great literature'. Literature can be studied without 'cramming opinions'; after all, English literature is profitably taught in schools as literature, and that is by no means a purely post-Leavisian development. Surely there is something wrong when a form of unusually intelligent and well-trained boys, invited to comment on verses 82 to 86 of the Second Idyll of Theocritus (a set book), find nothing worthy of remark but the dialect and the syntax?

What in fact is often wrong is that the training has been *too* good. Even for the future classical specialist, the notion that the

⁷ A. D. Godley, *Reliquiae*, ed. C. R. L. Fletcher, ii (1926), 213-4.

⁸ See J. P. Sullivan, 'The Classics and their Critics', *Essays in Criticism* xi (1961), 190-202.

languages can be learned first and then used as the key to the cultural storehouse of antiquity is fallacious; in the pursuit of the means the end is lost to view, and the edge of response and interest is blunted, often for good. As poor Dorothea Casaubon sorrowfully put it, 'It is very difficult to be learned; it seems as if people were worn out on the way to great thoughts and can never enjoy them because they are too tired'. And for the non-specialist the idea is even more unpractical. Latin literature is, after all, *about* something; the child will perceive only a small part, the undergraduate not always all that much more, and anything approaching a full understanding may come to the man only after years of knowledge and experience, perhaps only after suffering; but one must begin somewhere. What this means in practical terms for the teacher and the taught is that the response to be sought and elicited must be their response and not his, and that it must be firmly grounded in the strict interpretation of the text before them. Books of the type of Mackail's *Latin Literature* (still, I fear, a favourite) do untold harm by encouraging the ignoble art of writing about books without having actually read them.⁹ Examiners must spend more time and ingenuity on devising tests of the ability of candidates to use their minds on what they read rather than the ability to memorize and regurgitate. It is absurd to ask candidates to answer questions about, let us say, the *Aeneid*, unless they have a complete text before them; but it is still done in, for instance, Part II of the Classical Tripos.

Further difficulties arise when we come to consider what books we are to read. To put it bluntly, just how good is classical literature? (See Leacock again.) Much is first-rate, but how much more is second-rate or worse? Particularly to a modern reader the almost total lack of anything recognisable as humour is a cause of disappointment. 'Not even Aristophanes', wrote Saintsbury (I quote from memory) 'has a sure command of our

⁹ See Leacock's essay, 'Homer and Humbag' (in *Behind the Beyond*), from which the quotation at the head of this article is taken. It should be required reading for all teachers of classical literature.

risibility'; and if the field is relatively barren in Greek, what is it in Latin? Lamb wrote of the 'thin jests' of Terence, 'which at their first broaching could scarcely have had *vis* enough to move a Roman muscle'; what is really funny in the whole of Roman literature, apart from the *Genā Trimalchionis*? This is important if we are to succeed in convincing our pupils that, notwithstanding appearances, the Romans were human. Latin books that can be read with much enjoyment by children are not numerous. Greek wins hands down here: for the 'shame-culture' of Homer's warriors is simply the schoolboy code with heroic trappings, and the poetry appeals directly to the senses and the emotions of youth, as it did, even in Pope's version, to Kinglake. In contrast the *Aeneid* is sophisticated, difficult, *old*; with layer upon layer of significance and beauty, but all to be disentangled and interpreted against the literary and political background and the ideals, aspirations and experiences of the first century B.C. How much of this can be apprehended by boys or girls of sixteen? What can the Latin prose writers offer to compare with Herodotus and Thucydides? Which even of the poets can be expected to have much appeal to young readers today, always excepting Catullus? Possibly more could be done to profit from the fact that we live in an increasingly oral society and culture, and more attention paid to the sound and rhythm of Latin. Ancient literature was written to be heard; and a speech of Cicero or a satire of Juvenal cannot be said to be interpreted properly unless it is declaimed aloud. I have rarely met an undergraduate who admitted to reading Latin aloud regularly, and the result when it is attempted is frequently pitiful. Yet how otherwise is it possible to appreciate Latin poetry? The time-honoured nonsense about *lacrinae rerum* would not impose on a reader who punctuated by ear. Early training will be important here.

III

I have always been fond of the story of the boy who learned Latin for two years before discovering that it was a language,

but it is an uncomfortable fable. One has met students who have learned it for ten years without apparently being wholly convinced. How is Latin to be taught so that Latin books may be read efficiently? About the direct method I do not know enough to comment, but I will hazard the remark that it seems to me to have stringent limitations. Granted that we know enough about the colloquial idiom to teach its correct use – a large assumption to make of a dead language,¹⁰ but for the sake of argument let it pass – the books that we are to read and for whose sake we study the language are for the most part composed in a *Kunstsprache* of more or less difficulty and sophistication. A handful of classical Latin authors – Plautus, Terence, Cicero in the Letters, Petronius – write Latin varyingly tinged with colloquialism, it is true, but these are not necessarily the authors we shall most wish to read. Literary Latin is an artificial idiom, and so far from trying to disguise the fact we must as far as possible exploit it in our teaching. This does not mean more Caesar (indeed the intensive study of Caesar in schools is, in my view, only justifiable on the ground, which I hope will disappear, that he is necessary as the most accessible source of good prose constructions), but the careful study of etymology, syntax, word-order, idiom, sentence-structure, period, metre, figures of speech (so-called), and so on, not for their own sake but for their relevance to the interpretation of the texts being read and for their historical significance. Obsolete categories and terminology must be scrapped. When a Latin poet writes *reditiuque* for the 'normal' *it reditiuque* nothing is explained by calling the phenomenon *hysteron proteron*, but an enquiry into the possibilities and limitations of such variations in word-order may end by telling us something valuable about the nature of the Latin utterance, which may have wide applications. When Virgil begins the *Georgics* with the words 'Quid faciat laetas

¹⁰ Underlined by a recent correspondence in *The Times Educational Supplement* turning on whether the phrase 'Wenn das Schlimmste zum Schlimmsten kommt' is or is not correct colloquial German. To reach a conclusion (not unanimous) on this subject took several weeks and the combined efforts of many correspondents, some of them native German speakers.

segetes', the etymology of *laetus* deserves discussion, not as an isolated linguistic curiosity, but as relevant to the interpretation, because it brings the reader at the very outset of a great national poem face to face with the rustic origins of the tremendous tongue which 'left the plough to found an empire'.

Is the aim of teaching our pupils to read intelligently and fluently helped by composition? If not, it must go, or be retained only as optional. In my view composition does not help. This is a conclusion which has not been reached without some heart-searching, since composition has always given me pleasure (though teaching it gives me less and less), and I believe that sometimes, properly taught and subordinated to the proper ends, it can be profitable. In particular I should be sorry to see verse composition disappear entirely, for my personal belief is that it is a far more helpful critical exercise (which is the point) than composition in prose. Somehow, too, the potential classical scholar ought to be encouraged to compose without the compulsion of composition for all, since for him the exercise does provide linguistic experience which it is difficult to imagine being achieved in any other way.¹¹ But for the majority I can only say that, so far as my experience goes, composition performs no useful function that is remotely proportional to the time and effort that is expended on it. This ground has been fought over often enough in the past (for instance by Farnell and Godley), and a full discussion here would be inappropriate, but the matter is now urgent and the issues must be faced.

I will advance a number of propositions and pose a number of questions on which it seems to me that discussion of the problem must be based.

First: the place occupied by prose composition in the classical curriculum is due to the accidents of history. Four or five centuries ago there were excellent practical reasons for teaching boys to write Latin prose. These reasons do not now exist, but

¹¹ This, I am sure, is what gives many of John Jackson's corrections of Greek verse texts their superior elegance. See *Marginalia Scandinavica* (1955), *passim*.

horror vacui has operated to invent others. Are they genuine reasons, which would have occurred to anybody without a *status quo* to defend? We must be honest and dispassionate about this.¹²

Secondly: a relationship is often assumed or stated to exist between reading and composing in Latin. Does such a relationship exist and what is its nature? To what extent can it be shown that one aids the other, and is the benefit (even in theory) in proportion to the expenditure of effort? No doubt linguistic and educational researchers are investigating these questions, but few classical scholars and teachers know much about the theoretical basis of this (by some thought indispensable) part of their discipline.

Thirdly: it is sometimes stated that composition is valuable and satisfying to the composer as an act of creation. This is an argument on which some stress was laid by Godley.¹³ But in fact do the results generally achieved nowadays represent anything in which a student can legitimately take even a humble pride? Part I of the Classical Tripos may be thought to represent a standard as high as one might reasonably expect to find anywhere in the world, but the best prose now produced by Part I candidates are not as a rule impressive, and the majority range from the mediocre to the contemptible.

Fourthly: so far from aiding the appreciation of literature, composition, more often than not, actually inhibits or damages the literary and linguistic responses of all but the most naturally gifted by encouraging the delusion that one language can be satisfactorily interpreted in terms of another.¹⁴ This of course is even more true of the 'sentence' than the prose. One opens a recent first Latin book and comes on the sentence, set for translation, 'War harms the fields'. Now *bellum agris nocet* is, for all I know, excellent Latin; but 'war harms the fields' is not English, at any rate not the sort of English spoken or written outside the pages of a Latin textbook. Passable English equivalents may be

¹² Cf. Colman, *art. cit.* 75.

¹³ *Loc. cit.* 227-8.

¹⁴ Cf. W. R. Lee, *Didaktikos* I (1969), 128ff.

found for the phrase *bellum agris nocet*: 'war ruins the countryside' or 'war has a bad effect on agriculture' or what not *according to context* – but here is no context and the entire exercise is meaningless. It is because they have been subjected to this kind of thing that students arrive at University with their heads stocked with linguistic equations: *ager* = 'field' (probably with a connotation of hedges, barbed wire and buttercups) and 'field' = *ager*, so that if they encounter the phrase *latos per agros* in a Latin poet they render it as 'over the broad fields' and feel that they have done all that can reasonably be expected of them.

It would perhaps be a pity to dispense altogether with handling the language, but more economical and profitable ways must be found. There is room for experiment here. One good old exercise, of which more use might be made, is that of retranslation into Latin from a good, that is, fluent and idiomatic, non-translationese, English version. Comparison of the pupil's approximation with a Ciceronian or Livian original would give a real opportunity for critical and literary appraisal (which would include criticism of the English translation) against a genuine and objective standard, the only one we possess – the text of an ancient author. Précis, paraphrase and short original compositions all deserve consideration, and all seem superior to translation from English as avoiding the fallacy already noticed above and commented on by Dr Lee. The abolition of the traditional type of composition need not and indeed must not mean a decline in rigour. 'When educational reform, whether accidentally or not, takes the line of making things easier,' sarcastically remarked Godley, 'the classics are bound to be handicapped.'¹⁵ Nothing that is here proposed is intended to have the effect of making Latin a soft option in the manner so graphically imagined by Mr Levens.¹⁶ What is advocated should entail not a decline but an intensification in the right kind of rigour. Critical reading of texts ought to be quite as exacting as composition and eventually more rewarding, since after reading a poem of

Catullus or a speech by Cicero in this way the pupil should have learned something, not only about the Latin language, but about the species to which he belongs and its roots in the past. There is no doubt that this approach will make considerable demands on the teacher, as I have already said and as Dr Bolgar observes (p. 26), but I do not believe that they are impossible demands and they ought to be stimulating. It is perhaps too much to hope in an unideal world that all teachers should be passionately convinced of the importance of their subject, but let us at any rate reject the notion that Latin is to be taken as a kind of fortifying but rather nasty medicine.¹⁷

IV

Composition in Latin and Greek has sometimes been praised as fostering an appreciation of English literature, and there is, or rather has been, something in the point, though not enough. It is true that an attempt to turn Milton or Swift into Greek or Latin can be a rewarding critical exercise. But, apart from the fact that it seems an oddly elaborate and uneconomical way of instilling English literature (who would have thought of *devising* it for that purpose?), I do not believe that it now works in most cases, for an obvious historical reason, and for the same reason it will work less and less as time goes by. The authors usually favoured for rendering – Swift, Addison, Gibbon, Burke, Pitt, Macaulay for prose – are favoured precisely because they were heavily under the influence of classical models and offer obvious stylistic affinities, but most students nowadays have very little acquaintance or sympathy with them; indeed it is not at all uncommon to find that they simply do not understand them.¹⁸ It is admittedly possible to find modern prose that will translate

¹⁵ As for instance seems to be held by the hero of Mr Alan Ker's amusing novel, *The New Headmaster* (1956).

¹⁶ In a recent scholarship paper a piece of Macaulay set for Latin prose included the fine sentence (in a passage full of classical colouring and allusions), 'Desolation was in their imperial cities and famine all along the banks of their broad and redundant rivers'. Practically all the candidates (for classical awards) thought that 'redundant' meant 'superfluous'.

well, but being written in a non-classical idiom it taxes the Latinity of all but the best performers to an intolerable extent. Certainly the study of English and classical literature should go hand in hand, but there are better ways of bringing this about. Milton should be read as well as the *Aeneid*, Pope as well as Horace's *Satires*, Donne as well as Catullus and Propertius. But how often does this happen, even in the sixth form? For several years now, when interviewing Classical Scholarship candidates, I have asked them how much English they were doing in school, and more often than not the answer is none at all – for what they innocently refer to as English is very often pseudo-English, General Paper pap having no connection with English literature. After a boy is accepted for admission, I generally advise him to spend as much time as he can before coming up reading English literature, and some do (some don't, and some try but find it bewildering and boring), but this is not the same thing as the systematic and interrelated study that ought to take place at school. Poetry is poetry, whatever language it is written in. (For this reason I question whether Mr Levens is right to attach so much importance to the tyranny of the Secondary Schools Examinations Council.¹⁹ What's in a name? 'Roman poetry' sounds a splendid title, with a brazen ring that is lacking to 'Latin'.)

It is probably unrealistic to blame the schools for this situation, though the fact remains that a handful of good schools *do* find the time to teach classical specialists English properly. Twofold pressure, which it is impossible for many schools to resist, is exerted by the Universities: first, through the high standard of their linguistic entrance requirements, and secondly, through the rigidly departmental organization of their faculties. The first of these pressures, which I imagine must come from Oxbridge in the main, is corrigible, and I hope will be corrected. At present one has no choice but to turn down candidates who cannot make a showing in the Scholarship Examination because they could not manage the Tripos as it now is, and should

¹⁹ *Art. cit.* 97.

therefore be kept from it for their own good; but this class in fact includes boys who could perfectly well manage a classical course of a different kind, and profit from it, as an aggrieved Headmaster rightly pointed out to me recently. Conversely some rather dull boys get in, by expert performances over the linguistic hurdles, who thereafter stagnate. The second pressure is less easily eliminated, but there is an opportunity here for newer foundations, which is already being taken at Sussex.²⁰ If they can manage to attract some of the more able classical students away from Oxbridge, they may be doing a real service to classical studies. And anything that can be done in the older Universities to facilitate interaction (not only by changing from one Tripos to another) between the classical and other disciplines will also be all to the good. The present Faculty-centred organization naturally tends to perpetuate the situation in the schools, which are apt to be staffed, at any rate in the sixth form, with single-subject graduates. Kipling and Compton Mackenzie enjoyed a literary education at school of a breadth and quality that is almost inconceivable nowadays because they were taught by men (Crofts and the fantastic Elam) who were equally at home in both ancient and modern literature. Men like Crofts and Elam are rare in any generation, and there would never be enough of them to go round, but it is a pity that our present system seems designed actually to discourage such men from developing at all.

²⁰ M. Wright, 'The Place of Classics in a New University', *Didaskalos* 1 (1963), 27–35.

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