

A theory of classical education VI

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Depend upon it, Sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.

DR JOHNSON

The question of the position of Classics in a national system of education touches at almost every point the whole field of education from an historical, a theoretical and a practical point of view. The Classics are not . . . something that has recently been added to the educational curriculum . . . and the readjustment of their claim to modern conditions cannot be considered without a survey of the whole province of liberal education.

Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister to enquire into the position of Classics in the educational system of the United Kingdom; dated 27 November 1919.

It is obvious that the position of the Classics is under attack. That Latin was once the main subject in the grammar school curriculum is now a matter of educational history, and there can be very few Classics teachers today who would wish to see it regain that position; the great majority accepts the end of its long reign as educationally and socially right. For some years after that change Latin retained a decent footing in the time-table as a natural, perhaps even an essential, part of the grammar school course, to be studied, if not by all children, at least by all those considered capable of mastering its rigorous system. This stage too has now ended, and many children of the highest ability go through school without learning Latin. Furthermore, if an O-level pass in a classical language ceased to be widely required for entrance to university departments of English, History and Modern Languages, this number would very probably increase. But again, we suspect,

a large number of Classics teachers accepts this change too without regret. We have now reached a stage where any significant drop in the number of children studying Latin, unless matched by the growth of other kinds of classical course, will be fatal to the position of Classics in our schools.

Would this be a disaster? To many teachers, harassed by continual sniping at their subject from colleagues or rivals, a further statement of the case against the Classics may well seem unnecessary and even dangerous; it certainly demands a word of explanation, for we do not wish to be accused of lowering the morale of our own ranks and giving comfort to the enemy. Previous writers in this series have already examined this case, but it seems to us that they have chosen to concentrate on its more explicit aspects, on those arguments which are openly adduced for opposition to the Classics, and have neglected those equally important arguments that are seldom stated but are implicit in the social climate of the day. It may seem impossible to grapple with these intangible manifestations of emotional prejudice, but they do not go away when we shut our eyes, and, unless we believe that the gulf between the emotional and the rational is unbridgeable, any attempt to bring them into the open must have some value. Our defence and, we hope, our counter-attacks must be based on the most complete knowledge we can attain of the enemy's dispositions. In any case, while it would be ironical if the last activity of the 'trained mind' were to attempt an analysis of its own deficiencies, it would not be wholly dishonourable.

Of these unconscious attitudes the most widespread and the most dangerous is that which identifies the Classics with the use made of them by a rejected 'establishment'. To regard the social and political élite of England over the last two hundred years as unchanging would be absurd; it has continually accepted recruits from fresh quarters. But it would be far from absurd to argue that it has operated, most successfully, on a closed-shop basis, that by establishing the criteria for the admission of new members it has retained control of the pace of change, and that, although Classics teachers have not all seen their rôle in this light, it has nevertheless found the Classics a useful tool in this operation. The main social function of an

education in the Classics during this period has been to serve as a distinguishing mark, an old school tie, for the current élite, as a Shibboleth by which a man might know his peers. Not until the very end of the nineteenth century did this situation begin to change; only after the second world war has the process of change been at all rapid.

Two educational trends, united in their attack on the position of the Classics but in all essential respects opposed to each other, have accelerated the change. There was first the pressure from other subjects to be accepted as of equal value with the Classics in securing admission to the élite; its logical extension would be a form of meritocracy. Secondly, there is the egalitarian trend, opposed in principle to a social system based on a single élite and insisting that, although the existence of inherent differences in intelligence between one man and the next may be a natural law, the importance we attach to such differences is rather a matter for the moral choice of the society as a whole. This second trend has derived great strength from three factors: the extension of the franchise, the spread first of Primary and more recently of Secondary education, and the growth of new media of communication. In bringing into balance once more the responsibility of the populace, its education, and the availability of the information it requires, these may seem to make possible the end of élite-democracy—

λόγῳ μὲν δημοκρατία, ἔργῳ δὲ ὑπὸ τῶν πρώτων ἀνδρῶν ἀρχή

as Thucydides would describe it—and the creation of a more complete democracy than has existed since the Athens of the 'demagogues'.

The resentment occasioned by the position of the Classics in sustaining an élite should not, therefore, surprise us. Nor can we yet claim that we have broken off the affair and are clear of its embarrassments, for our opponents might point out that where we have yielded it has been under compulsion and that our greatest strength is still concentrated in the dangerously narrow sector of the independent and direct grant schools. In the manner and content of our teaching some traces of this attitude also persist. We have already suggested that the view of Athenian democracy still generally current in the schools is

open to question. In the same period the failure of the Athenians to develop any effective democratic ideals in the educational field to match those in the political field receives hardly any attention, yet Aristophanes and Plato, at least, recognized the interconnection of these problems. The same bias appears in Roman History, where it is too often assumed that all Englishmen would have been senators and where the specious attractions of the 'Great Men' approach to history seem very strong. The slow and hieratic progression from first declension to fifth, from simple sentences to complex prose, from 'made up' Latin to real; the very name 'Classics', with its suggestion of an unalterable canon of literary works remaining fixed through eternity in a divinely ranked order of merit—these too remind one uneasily of the old connection between Classics and élite; *agnosco veteris vestigia flammae*.

Again, it could be said that in losing one rôle we have not succeeded in finding another; we might make shift to get by under a meritocracy, but what is to be our place in an egalitarian society? There is room here for some research into the social background of classical teachers and pupils. That the rise in the numbers studying Latin and Greek has not kept pace with the rise in other subjects is well known. In our present situation, though, it is important to find out whether our decline in popularity is general over the whole social range or is markedly greater among pupils whose parents did not attend grammar schools. Are we creating any fresh loyalties or are we merely hanging on to a dwindling *clientela*?

There are already teachers of Classics who find, as we do, much that is embarrassing in this aspect of their subject's past and view the egalitarian trend with sympathy. Among the sixth-formers and university students of today—the future teachers, parents, voters, administrators—an impatience with social inequality is widespread. Does it need stating that a situation in which a decision to study Latin or Greek could be considered evidence of a fundamental resistance to social change would be dangerous in the extreme?

In the last article in this series Professor Peters said that 'it would be a waste of time to take seriously the utilitarian arguments for learning Classics'. Now we agree entirely with his

conclusion that the case for the Classics is cultural, but think it important to question his perhaps rather easy rejection of the word 'utilitarian'. After all, it is in these terms that the question is often put, 'What's the use of learning Latin?', and if we begin our reply with the words 'It's of no use,' our 'but . . .' will hardly be heard.

As we have argued above, it would be wrong for classicists to fortify an ivory tower against society, but this is not to suggest that we should rush to the other extreme and accept without question all its current values. Yet this is a claim that is often made: education should fit one for society. Such a claim seems to us to be based upon too narrow an understanding of the relation between society and education or any other of its constituent activities. This should not be simple, not merely a matter of one leading and the other following, but complex, with the initiative for change coming now from education, now from what we call society, now from the arts, the sciences, or politics. The narrowness of vision involved in this claim is particularly dangerous to the Arts subjects, for it is their glory that they bring before the pupil directly and early a whole series of questions about the purpose and meaning of life, *de finibus bonorum et malorum*, and that these involve the whole personality of the pupil, moral, emotional and rational, and not merely the last.

For these reasons we should insist that the utilitarian arguments for the Arts subjects must be taken seriously, and, if our use of the word 'utilitarian' is unfamiliar, must be often repeated. We must not allow our opponents to foist on us a definition of the word that prejudices our case.

In passing, it might be worth considering how well other subjects would stand up to the utilitarian test, if we take the word in its narrower sense. Some, such as Art and Music, would obviously fail, while others, such as English, would not wish their primary justification to be made on this ground. The study of Modern Languages in schools is sometimes defended on grounds of utility—we need to export more, we shall join the Common Market, people go abroad for their holidays nowadays—but this can hardly stand up to examination. The percentage of the country's workers directly engaged

in exporting is likely to remain small, and, in terms of cost-effectiveness, we should be better advised to wait until we can identify them and then give them a few months' concentrated work in a language laboratory than to put a large proportion of the school population through an O-level language course. And there's not much point in knowing German if you always spend your holiday in Spain. Modern linguists too must rely on a cultural argument. Similarly, while there is an obvious utilitarian argument for Mathematics and the Sciences, school courses in these subjects are always likely to range more widely and to deal with more advanced problems than a strict attention to the purely vocational needs of the average pupil would permit. Their defence too must be that a knowledge of these subjects should form part of the 'interpretative framework', to use Professor Peters's phrase, 'of any educated person'. The Classics do not stand alone in requiring a wider interpretation of the word 'utilitarian'.

We have mentioned above our reasons for valuing the Arts subjects. Can Latin and Greek fairly claim a place among them? In absolute terms, as few will deny, we can make out an impressive case: the importance of their literature, philosophy, visual arts and governmental experience is still recognized today. But, while this may be relevant to the education of the classical undergraduate, it needs considerable qualification before it becomes relevant to the education of the pupil in the Middle School. We cannot use Plato to defend Caesar. Our case must be argued in relative terms. What can we do that is better than, or usefully different from, the work done in, say, English? Can we do this from the start, in the first year of Latin, or only after a preliminary course lasting some three or four years? Would the periods allocated to Latin be better spent on Music or History? Why should a school employ a Classics graduate, half of whose time might be spent with small groups, in preference to another English specialist? These are all entirely proper questions, and our case will only deserve serious consideration when we can provide an adequate answer to them.

Moreover, our main concern must be with the Middle School and, in particular, with the reform of the O-level Latin course and the development of CSE and 'Foundation' courses.

(In this article we feel bound by the limits of our personal experience to concentrate on the implications of the former.) We do not mean to imply by this that all is well with the sixth form and Greek—far from it—but such particular problems as they pose seem to us less pressing, in that they involve fewer pupils, and less difficult of solution in themselves. In the sixth form the comparative maturity of the pupils and their greater skill in reading the languages facilitate new approaches and changes of emphasis. In Greek, many teachers find that the literature that can be read with an O-level class is more attractive and varied than material of comparable difficulty in Latin. Again, most of those who start Greek at school have already done some Latin and can use their experience of one inflected language in tackling another; they probably have some interest in the ancient world already and are usually drawn from the abler Latinists—in many schools the subject is restricted to the A stream, and the occasional B-streamer who wishes to start Greek must be moved up, or 'the time-table won't work'. (We should perhaps add that we are only commenting on the present situation. Suggestions that Greek could be more widely taught and need not pre-suppose a knowledge of Latin have our complete sympathy.) Finally, though we do not wish to dwell on Greek, one point in Mr Dexter's article in last year's *Didaskalos* demands attention. We should wish to question his use of the fact that 'a good proportion'—about a half in the last year for which we have information—'of those taking O-level Greek . . . will be studying Classics in the sixth form'. For him this is some justification of the current type of O-level syllabus. To us the important point is not that 1322 take A-level Greek (they are not necessarily all classicists), but that only 2647 take O-level. Might it not be that the present syllabuses deter almost all pupils except those rare few who have decided in the third that they may wish to study Greek in the sixth form? This would not, in our view, be a healthy situation. We should like the Middle School Greek course to have the reputation not just of being a good preparation for sixth-form Greek but also of being an interesting self-contained course for the future historian, modern linguist, or scientist, and we want a syllabus that will help us achieve this aim.

It is at this stage that some of the more commonly heard criticisms of the Classics become relevant, and among these the claim that Latin and Greek are 'dead' languages demands first attention. We have already considered one aspect of this criticism, the utilitarian, but this is perhaps not the whole of the matter. Our traditional reply to this claim begins correctly, if rather pedantically, by calling in question this use of the word 'dead', and draws a distinction between such languages as Etruscan (with no surviving literature) and Latin or Greek. We then point out that literature cannot die (Horace, *Odes* III, 30, etc.). Finally we draw a comparison between a person wishing to read Racine and the would-be classicist wishing to read Sophocles: each must learn a language, and his method in so doing, we say, is irrelevant to the argument. Or we may prefer the analogy with music: to hear the music of Homer or Virgil you must learn to read the score.

However correctly it began, this argument has become rather disingenuous by its end. The difference between a 'living' language and a 'dead' one can most clearly be seen if we take an extreme case and compare the study of English literature in the Middle School with that of Latin. It is not so much that the experiences forming the subject-matter of Latin literature are more alien to us than those in English literature—that is only sometimes true—as that we do not move naturally in the medium in which they are expressed. Simply because we do not express our thoughts and emotions in Latin but in English, the Latin words remain fixed to the page even when we know their 'meaning'; they strike our ear without the fuzz of associated meanings and half-remembered contexts that surrounds an English word. In place of the rich texture of our own language, we react in Latin only to a single thread. We have, then, to create this linguistic experience for our pupils artificially, and this is always likely to be a long process.

'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 Greek and Latin that I could take a passage 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's

confession has already been quoted in this series by Mr Kenney, but we make no apology for quoting it again, for the situation so feelingly described is still perilously with us today. The main purpose of each stage of a typical school Latin course is to equip the pupil for a successful attempt on the next; from the very beginning it concentrates on the requirements of the future university specialist and largely ignores the needs of the average pupil. If this was ever defensible it is no longer so today, when of the pupils who take the O-level examination in Latin only some 15 per cent continue to A-level. The situation seems even worse when we remember that many pupils who start Latin 'drop out' before reaching O-level and that perhaps only a tenth of the A-level candidates continue their Latin in the universities. We must ensure that the interests of the average pupil—of the pupil, that is, who will go no further—predominate at every stage, and this will lead us to a very different course.

These are the arguments that seem to us most dangerous to the position of Classics today. What is the case for the defence? How can we vindicate our claim that Classics should continue to be one of the Arts subjects commonly taught in our schools?

What we consider the strongest points in this case, the points in which the study of Classics is unique among other subjects, have already been mentioned by Professor Peters. In studying Classics we study a civilization which is directly relevant to our own and yet essentially different from it. In considering the nature of this relevance and this difference we are considering the nature of our own civilization. We learn to experience both the personality of our own civilization, the quality which makes possible the use of some such term as 'European Civilization', and the fact of historical change, the fact that this quality does not manifest itself absolutely but is merely an attempt to define one stage in a process. Furthermore, the study of Classics forms a field, 'to which at least four "forms" of knowledge contribute in a pre-eminent degree—literary, historical, moral, philosophical'; to this list we should be tempted to add a fifth, appreciation of the visual arts.

The civilization of Greece and Rome is 'directly relevant' to our own. Of course, but how can we demonstrate this to our pupils? Sometimes it will be a matter of pointing out how

certain of its features persist to later times. The 'derivatives' question set by some examining boards is a simple example. We can also consider the development of the Latin language after the classical period; it is comparatively easy to find short, simple extracts, both prose and verse, secular and religious, from Medieval and Later Latin, while the connections between Latin and French are often useful. The growth of many European cities from Roman origins provides another example of this kind. At other times, though, the relevance will not be found in any chronological link. The value of a work of art does not depend primarily upon the circumstances of its composition or upon its later influence, but upon its intrinsic qualities. We should try to read Catullus as a poet, not as a Roman poet.

These are high-sounding claims and, if we are to be realistic, must be measured by the standard of the boy at the back of Lower VB, but even then we are confident that they can be embodied in a Middle School course. The extent to which they can be realized will naturally be comparatively small but it will be far from valueless.

We think it usually agreed that such a course should contain some reading of Latin literature in the original. Some part of Book II of the Aeneid is often chosen for this purpose, and we should like to examine briefly the contribution this book could make to the realization of these claims. Virgil describes the last night of Troy and Aeneas' departure on his long journey to found a new city in Latium. The world he is leaving is that of Homer's heroes, motivated by the desire

αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν καὶ ὑπείροχον ἔμμεναι ἄλλων

and scarcely admitting any social claim upon their assertive individualism; its key word is *furor*, the quality later embodied in Turnus but shared now by Aeneas too:

*Arma amens capio; nec sat rationis in armis,
sed glomerare manum bello et concurrere in arcem
cum sociis ardent animi; furor iraque mentem
praecipitat, pulchrumque mori succurrit in armis.*

The world he will reach is that of Rome, of heroes like the Decii and Torquatus who recognize the claim of society upon

their individual talents; its key word, *pietas*, the quality which Aeneas must earn and for lack of which Turnus must die. Moreover Aeneas will not become *pious* and found the new city until he has accepted his destiny; the change from one world to another takes place within Aeneas. One might also point out that the resurgence of the heroic mentality in Virgil's own lifetime—*dominatio quaesita ab utroque est*—and his own experience of Augustus' attempts to check it—*republicam a dominatione factionis oppressam in libertatem vindicavi*,

*Augustus Caesar, divi genus, aurea condet
saecula qui rursus Latio —*

were among the factors that led Virgil to write the Aeneid.

But this attempt to summarize one interpretation of the poem is a crude over-simplification of its full meaning and, while we concentrate on the historical, moral and philosophical modes of understanding, must remain so. Only the use of the literary mode can correct the situation; some part of the book must be read in Latin. We have argued that the contrast between original and translation is often wildly over-stated when applied to the average O-level pupil and that the road to a full understanding of Latin literature is long and difficult, but there is a difference, and reading in the original is the only road. In this case, even a hesitant and partial reading of what Virgil wrote will exclude some interpretations of the poem and confirm others.

As we have said, we believe that work of this kind is already possible in an O-level course, but the development of new teaching methods, so that our pupils may read original Latin earlier and more fluently, remains of the first importance if we are to give the literary mode the attention it deserves.

The difficulty, of course, is that we cannot read enough Latin in the original, certainly not as much as we should like, and must therefore make some use of translations. This will enable us both to read more of such authors as Virgil who are commonly read in the Middle School and to form some acquaintance with other authors whose work is usually considered too difficult; Lucretius, Juvenal and Plautus come to mind. When we turn to prose works, the gain is perhaps even

more obvious than with poetry. Less is lost in translation, for the historical, moral and philosophical modes are likely to predominate over the literary in our appreciation. Our pupils will be able to read not just a short portion of simplified Livy but the whole narrative of the Second Punic War, not just Caesar's account of his expedition to Britain but also the whole story of his Gallic command or, if preferred, the history of the conquest and organization of Roman Britain as described in Tacitus' *Agricola*.

The myth that examination papers do not affect the courses that lead up to them has perhaps lost some of its power of late, but it is still necessary to state that it is both false as a description of the present situation and dangerous as an ideal. The present O-level Latin papers do affect the teaching of the subject—it would be unreasonable to expect every teacher to fashion his own syllabus—and most of them militate against any progress towards the ideals we have suggested. Moreover, those who subscribe to the myth can find in it a ready excuse for inaction: if examination papers do not affect teaching, why bother to change them?

We badly need a new O-level Latin examination. This is not the place for a detailed explanation of the changes we should wish to see, but we may perhaps make three points in summary:

- 1 the emphasis in linguistic work should be on assessing the pupil's ability to read and comprehend Latin; translation from English into Latin should be reduced in importance or altogether excluded;
- 2 in examining books prescribed for reading in Latin the major emphasis should fall on the pupil's understanding and appreciation of the books, not merely on his ability to translate them;
- 3 in addition to books prescribed for reading in Latin other books should be prescribed for reading in translation and these too should be examined.

Still more, however, we need a new attitude to the whole business of examining, an attitude that will permit changes in syllabus and examination methods far more readily than has been the case in the past. Such matters should be discussed

more frequently, more openly, and more equally as between teachers and examiners than is usually the case at the moment; as individuals and as members of subject associations such as JACT we have a legitimate interest in them. After all, it is difficult to believe that any future syllabus will continue as long without major changes as have some of the current Latin O-level syllabuses.

Our survey of some of the problems facing the Classics today may strike many readers as pessimistic to the point of suicide—cyanide of potassium, perhaps?¹—but we do not ourselves regard the situation as desperate and feel that there are sufficient grounds to justify a cautious optimism. Paradoxically, one of the most hopeful factors seems to us to be the generally uncertain state of secondary education at the present. Plans for the reorganization of secondary education do not affect the Classics alone; in all subjects alike teachers must re-examine their aims and methods. In a general atmosphere of change, spurred on by external pressure, teachers of Classics too may, we hope, more easily be persuaded to commit themselves to the same process.

It has, of course, already begun, and two developments in particular call for notice. The first, and more immediately obvious, is that there have already been several changes in examination syllabuses for established courses. To mention only those of which we have personal experience, we now have the new Oxford and Cambridge A-level examinations in Latin and Greek, which allow schools a wide measure of flexibility in planning their sixth-form courses but ensure that purely linguistic interests will not predominate; the JACT A-level Ancient History syllabus, which was prepared by a JACT sub-committee after discussions involving classicists from schools and universities and which is administered by the Oxford and Cambridge Board but is also available to pupils from schools which usually take other Boards' papers; 'Syllabus B' of the London Board's O-level Latin examination, which was prepared by working parties of the London Association of Classical Teachers and the London Branch of the Classical Association; and the Greek O-level syllabus which was originally prepared

¹ See *Latin Teaching*, xxxii, 3 (1966), 92.

justify our optimism. The specific achievements of JACT are important, but even more so is the new atmosphere it has encouraged among Classics teachers, an atmosphere in which new ideas can be proposed and criticized, established ideas questioned and defended, problems of every kind freely discussed with fellow classicists from schools and universities. If we are now in a position to meet the changes that may come in our schools, then much of the credit must go to JACT.

We believe that our life would be much poorer if boys and girls could no longer learn Classics. Our critics are sometimes mean, jealous and ignorant, but very often they are men of integrity and wide sympathy, whose strictures are the more bitter because they see as clearly as we do ourselves the great potential of our subject. They face us with a noble challenge, and we must not refuse it; we must not be afraid of change, and we may yet cheat the gallows.

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