Sixth Form Studies: Classical Literature I

M. BALME

A literature is alive in so far as it is enjoyed. Clearly pleasure can be derived from literature at different levels. At one level enjoyment is simple and unreflecting; we can enjoy the Odyssey without considering questions about the nature of oral poetry or of heroic society: the whole Homeric question is here irrelevant, and unless enjoyment is first achieved at this level, all subsequent questions are arid and unimportant. At all levels we are primarily concerned with people, as individuals or in communities, whose deeds and thoughts are alive in the written word. At one level it is Nicias, Alcibiades and Demosthenes who live, at another Thucydides. At a higher level still we find a universal significance in his history, seeing it now neither merely as a record of particular human actions nor as an individual's assessment of remote events, but as a commentary on human conduct relevant to all *ὅσοι βουλήσονται . . . . τὸ σαφὲς σκοπεῖν τῶν μελλόντων ποτὲ αὖθις κατὰ τὸ ἀνθρώπειον τοιούτων καὶ παραπλησίων ἔσεσθαι* (Thuc. I. 22. 4.). These three attitudes, not rigidly separable, are possible approaches to all forms of literature, and, if we are to show that classical literature really is a *κτῆμα ἐς αἰεί*, we have to assist enjoyment at all these levels, in so far as this is possible at school; if we succeed, we will scotch the idea that a classical education is a training in dead languages concerned with remote and irrelevant events. In teaching we are at first concerned with the

simplest level. If there is a gulf between pre-specialist and sixth form work, it is because before the sixth form the main emphasis was bound to be linguistic, in the sixth form the main emphasis must be, or appear to be, on the matter; the study of the language must be seen only as a means of understanding the thought, which, at first, will usually mean enjoying a narrative. This may seem to underrate what can be achieved in the early stages, but the 'purely literary' approach seems to me not only the right introduction to the humanities but the only practical one when no knowledge of history can be assumed.

In placing the emphasis on content, we have to steer continually between the Scylla of pedantry and the Charybdis of imprecision. It requires unceasing effort to lift a lesson from minutiae of syntax and grammar and to keep things moving fast enough for consecutive significance to appear. It is, therefore, important to choose works that are not too difficult in language, more important that they should not be too difficult in thought. In Greek there is a strong case for starting with Homer and Herodotus; both have immediate appeal, not only because they are superlative story-tellers, but because their view of life is uncomplicated and no background of history is essential to their enjoyment; at the same time, if we start with these, history and literature will link up early. These factors outweigh the dialect difficulties which are more quickly overcome than one might expect; nor will the reading of Ionic have a disastrous effect on prose composition (the content of Herodotus is closer than most books to the type of piece set for composition at this stage and a few Ionicisms will hardly offend – some occur even in Thucydides). If Greek tragedy is to be read in the first year, the choice is not wide; most plays will seem infinitely remote and too much gloom in slow motion is a chilling business. The Rhesus, a drama of action, is a good introduction even if we do not consider it in the first rank as a tragedy. Aristophanes, on the other hand, can be read earlier than is traditional, especially in Cyril Bailey's edition of the Clouds (which is half in translation): nothing could be better calculated to dispel the illusion

that the classics are inhumanly elevated, and it can be combined with a reading of the Apology, surely the best introduction to Plato. The selection of suitable books presents no great difficulty and this is one reason why progress in Greek at this stage is often so much more rapid than progress in Latin.

If it is harder to find the right starting point in Latin, this is partly due to the comparatively limited range of surviving Latin literature of the classical period. In verse much of the Aeneid can be enjoyed as straightforward narrative. The Metamorphoses have an appeal, especially when they can be read fast enough for their humour to be apparent. Horace and Catullus can both be killed by wrong selection; the sophisticated detachment of the one and the fervent egotism of the other may equally miss the mark at this stage. For Horace we have an admirable introduction ready-made in Nash-Williams' 'Horace on Himself'. But in prose the problem becomes acute. Much of the best Latin prose is rhetorical in form and most is rhetorical in style; and rhetoric usually has little appeal to the young. I know of no complete speech of Cicero on which one can start successfully. An alternative is a selection of Cicero's Letters, omitting those with too much political content. Caesar has probably been overworked before O-level and in any case is totally unsuitable as an introduction to the humanities. Indeed, after the staple reading of the middle school, it would be a pity to include any book predominantly concerned with military matters, and for this reason I would exclude Livy, who in any case makes dull reading in small quantities. To this rule I would make one exception: Tacitus' Agricola. This can be read quite early and accompanied by an introduction to Roman Britain; which makes a fairly simple and coherent subject on its own. Tacitus is generally reckoned a harder author than Livy, but in practice the Agricola does not seem to give so much trouble – because the subject matter appeals.

Whatever books we choose in the first year, we often end a period with only thirty or forty lines translated piecemeal. For any meaning to survive this mangling process the whole must

usually be translated again fluently, and from time to time the story moved on by translating ahead. It is more important that the work should be completed and considered as a whole than that a few hundred lines should be known in detail while the rest remains a blank. The use of translations may here be advocated. There is a risk that they may be used as cribs, but less damage is likely to be done if the teacher's attitude is liberal from the start. The right use of translations is firstly for revision. The first dissection of the text must be made without a translation, but when it comes to revising the book it is unlikely that the second reading will be fast enough to grasp the work as a whole. Here a translation is invaluable and if one is not available we ourselves should translate the whole work through in a few periods. Secondly, translations can be used to read more of the author than the one book we are tackling. If one or two books of the Odyssey are being read in the class room, the whole should be read out of class in translation. If the Agricola is read in school, the relevant parts of the Annals can be read in translation.

The next year we inevitably come up against A-level and our reading, within fairly generous limits, is prescribed. It is obvious that the year's work should not be entirely geared to this; there is much to be said for having a thorough knowledge of certain texts at this stage, but four works would be an excessively small target and would narrow the process of education just when this should expand. We must read outside the syllabus in both original and translation. When history is being studied more intensively, some books can be chosen as bearing on the history, so that reading becomes more critical and synthetic. Whereas in the first year Thucydides is treated primarily as a narrative, in the second year one can consider him also as a source, and discuss his attitude to the events described. This would be the time to discuss the Homeric question in some detail, or Virgil's attitude to Rome and Augustus. Intelligent discussion of these questions presupposes a knowledge of the whole work, not of isolated books; and so again the use of translations is essential.

It may be noted in passing that the form of A-level papers does not change; the award of an A-level in Greek or Latin means no more than the attainment of a fairly low level of linguistic proficiency. One obvious remedy to this would be to set a general paper on classical literature.

Aristotle remarks that poetry is concerned with the universal, history with the particular, and it is in poetry that the universal significance of classical literature may first be recognized. This is ultimately a matter of individual experience, in which the reader recreates and relives the writer's emotions. In this sense we cannot prove the relevance of classical or any other literature; we can only act as a kind of pedagogic Diotima. Parallels in English poetry often throw light on what the ancient writer really means; detailed criticisms and comparisons of poems, and sometimes translation into English verse, all assist a consideration of what we are reading as poetry. On the intellectual level we can sometimes demonstrate relevance; in tragedy the themes of the Antigone, for instance, or the Medea are easily recognized as universal. Discussion arising from a reading of many of Plato's dialogues on moral and political questions cannot fail to show that the questions Plato considered are far from dead. But a large proportion of classical literature falls into neither of these classes. Historical resemblances are apt to be either superficial or too profound for treatment at school, but discussion of social or political topics, such as ancient and modern theories of education or the problem of reconciling law and liberty, can be fruitful; if reading in original and translation from ancient and modern authors is prescribed, this method can show how ancient thought and practice is relevant to perennial problems. At this stage, whatever method we choose, classical reading should link up with English literature and the contemporary world; ideally, reading in English and reading in the classics will be co-ordinated.

One is bound to consider university requirements. There is nothing in the contents of the Oxford and Cambridge scholarship examinations (out of nine papers usually four are con-

cerned with composition and two with unseen translation) to suggest that these universities are looking for much besides linguistic proficiency, although some colleges insist on a good performance in the general papers and seldom award a scholarship to a good linguist who fails to impress in these papers. But whether or not the universities give a lead to the schools, the traditional curriculum is clearly due for a revision, which will cut out all that hinders the enjoyment of the classics as a living literature and which will help to make their relevance clearer.

M. BALME
is Head of Classics
at Harrow School