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Latin Composition

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ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS

LATIN COMPOSITION.

I THINK every one ought to be dissatisfied with the standard of Latin and Greek composition, both at school and college. A piece of composition in any language which is not approximately correct, is, in my opinion, worth little; and one which wins only half marks is practically worthless. What good purpose can be served by an exercise which is half wrong? How can any mental discipline be of value which accepts such a standard? How can any real literary feeling be present in one who knows no more of accident and idiom than to produce such a thing? These paragraphs in which I explain my own thoughts may not meet with the reader's acceptance: but what would the reader think of them if every other sentence were incorrect in some way, and if many of them were a travesty of English idiom? No thoughts so expressed could gain a hearing; all the reader's faculties would be absorbed in roars of laughter.

And yet, worse standards than this are accepted. Thirty-three per cent. is generally counted a pass mark; in many school exercises a mark is given for every word that is right, even if five-sixths or nine-tenths be wrong, and if the whole be a horror. I have known successful teachers, who told their pupils to put dashes if they did not know

anything, and I have seen a dozen lines of English represented in examination after this fashion:

Tum - - - - venire - - quem - - -
- cuius - - - - -
- - et - - - - neque - - - - hoc - - - -

None of us, again, who have had to instruct more advanced pupils, at school or university, but have met constantly with blunders in elementary accident, blunders in syntax, literal translations of English words in place of idiomatic phrases, even sheer stupidities like *Equites Arabici* for Arabian Nights. I suppose many of us schoolmasters regard it as one of the joys of our calling to keep a book of comical answers. I am convinced also, that hardly any but the very best boys or girls have any idea of the effect of rearranging the words in a correct Latin or Greek sentence. The rank and file, the middle forms of public schools, are in a slough of despond.

Is there any cure for this? If not, I for one believe that classical study must do positive harm. The result of the study on those who make such blunders is surely bad; surely it cannot be maintained that those who tolerate them can feel the beauty of the classical authors when they read them, or indeed

that they understand them at all. As soon will I believe that he enjoys and understands a fugue of Bach played on King's College organ, who goes home, and sings a music-hall song, out of tune, to the accompaniment of a cracked piano.

One cause of this state of things is clear: pupils are habitually allowed to go on to the later stages without having mastered the earlier. If 33 per cent. will do for the fifth form, it will doubtless do for the first; time presses, and the boys must go up; no doubt they will soak in the grammar with time. But they don't; the second form has its own quota, and one master relieves his mind by saying hard things of the other: the boys, however, continue to be passing rich on thirty-three per cent. Whom are we to blame, then? The master of the first form, or the boys, or the powers that fix the allotted task for each form? Or nature? perhaps it may be inevitable.

But it will be seen at once that this is not inevitable. If we confine ourselves to the simplest vocabulary, accident, and idiom, it is possible to attain accuracy. This may imply that we do not at first read classical authors, but very simple pieces of Latin written by Englishmen, or by Corderius or Erasmus, and that we exercise our pupils in very simple expressions of thought. I believe that this, even if no more were possible, would be better intellectually than to read Virgil with understanding of thirty-three per cent., and to write Latin prose of the same standard. But much more is possible.

Our problem is partly dependent on time: if therefore we can find a way which saves time, we shall be able to do more. Now it takes about five times as long to write as to speak; if then we do our practice work by speaking instead of writing, we shall be able to advance a good deal faster. The method of oral question and answer has other advantages. When a pupil has laboriously hammered out some sentence, and carefully written it down, it leaves an impression far stronger than the master's correction, even if that be followed by a correct writing. I urge that the mistakes should be made orally, and instantly corrected by the master; then the correct phrase to be repeated by the boy and by the

whole form in chorus; but nothing to be put down on paper until there is good likelihood of the result being quite right. Secondly: there are in conversation a number of small changes which make it necessary for each party to keep his intelligence active. If I ask, *Quid facis?* the answer is not *quid facis*, repeated parrot-wise, but (say) *nihil facio*, or *scribo*, or what not. Thirdly: it is possible by question and answer to make clear from the first the essential structure of an inflected language, as depending for emphasis on the order of words; and this lies at the root of style. Thus a simple sentence may give matter for several questions. Take *Caesar Labienum laudat*. I may ask, *Quem laudat Caesar?* Answer: *Labienum laudat Caesar*. Question: *Quid facit Caesar?* Answer: *Laudat Labienum Caesar*. If all the texts read are treated in this way, the pupils become used to correct accident, syntax, and order, and learn the elements of style. If again the teacher will condescend to use words which may not often meet him in the inspired vocabulary of Caesar, he has to hand in the daily business of the classroom a means of practice, which will enable him easily to drill his form in all the common constructions of syntax. Instead of, 'Open the window, Smith,' why not say, *Faber, aperi fenestram?* And as Smith does it, let him say, *Aperio fenestram*. Then we may proceed as follows: *Quid dicis? Dico me aperire fenestram. Ludovice, quid dicit Faber? Se fenestram aperire dicit Faber. Balbe, quid dixit Ludovicus? Fabrum fenestram aperire dixit Ludovicus*. All this is a clear gain: for the time would otherwise have been spent without a word of Latin. And more is possible still. *Tu, quid est tibi nomen? Nomen est mihi Alexandro. Scisne quid fecerit Faber? Scio quid fecerit Faber. Quare aperui fenestram? Ut aer iniret; ne suffocaremur, ne moreremur*. At the end let all be tested by writing, until they know the rules perfectly, which they soon will.

These exercises are all exercises in accident and syntax; the vocabulary is small, and well known. To increase vocabulary, other means must be taken; but my object has been to show, how a class of average boys may be led to express simple ideas in correct

and idiomatic Latin: more complex ideas must be treated in another way. For this purpose, and for new words, the reproduction of a story is very useful. Any simple story will do, but it should have a point, and be such as to interest the pupils. I would tell the story in simple sentences, asking the class to repeat what is said in one shape or another, with strict orders that no boy shall let anything pass that he does not understand, whether word or construction. I give a few sentences as an example, from the story of the tailor who pricked the elephant's trunk with his needle.

Master. Solebat aliquando elephante quidam cottidie iter facere praeter tabernam. Quid faciebat?

Boys. Iter faciebat praeter tabernam.

M. Quando?

B. Cottidie.

M. Dicite igitur quid factum sit.

B. Elephante quidam cottidie praeter tabernam iter faciebat.

M. In hac taberna sedebat sartor.

A Boy. Nescio quid sit sartor.

M. Scribe tu in tabula. [*A boy writes it on the board.*] Sartor is est, qui sarcit vestimenta: sarcio, sarcire, sarsi, sartum. An comprehenditis?

Boys. Non comprehendimus quid dicas.

M. Anglice *tailor*. Quis est igitur sartor?

B. Is qui sarcit vestimenta, sartor est.

M. Ubi sedebat?

B. In taberna sua sedebat.

M. Ita: sedebat in taberna sua sarcians vestimenta.

—Now combine those two sentences.

A Boy. Solebat elephante quidam iter facere cottidie praeter tabernam.

M. —tabernam—

The Boy. Solebat elephante quidam iter facere praeter tabernam, in qua sartor sedebat sarcians vestimenta.

In the same way, all the logical connexions are brought out: first simple sentences are given, then two combined, then more if

necessary; and finally the class write out the whole, each in his own way, but with instructions to include (say) relative clauses, a *cum*-clause, purpose, consequence, or whatever the master's plan may have been. By degrees the amount of help is decreased, until the outlines of a story only are given, to be filled in; or a theme to be discussed, or an event described.

Now, and not before, I would present to the boys a new problem, in the shape of a piece of English to translate into Latin. The piece should not include constructions which have not been used already in the reproductions or free compositions; and especial care should be taken not to give for translation turns of idiom which express any thought that has not been already expressed at some time by the boy. If this be impossible, the master should tell the boy how to treat the new idiom. The same may be generally said of vocabulary; but that does not matter so much as idiom, since the possible mistakes would not be so bad.

How far this plan could be carried we cannot tell without trying; but I believe it might be carried very far. At any rate, a set of exercises can be produced by average schoolboys of fifteen, which are approximately correct: there may be three or four mistakes on the average, and several pieces will be quite perfect. Our chief hindrance is lack of material; but the boy's command both of vocabulary and idiom may be very greatly enlarged by a certain treatment of the text-books that are read. This must be reserved for another occasion.

W. H. D. ROUSE.

GREEK LITERATURE AS ILLUSTRATING HISTORY.

THE article by Freiherr von Wilamowitz-Möllerndorff in the February number of the *Class. Rev.* on the teaching of 'Greek in the Public School' raises a vital question. The traditional theory of classical teaching in England depends for its validity upon the importance of scholarship in a general secondary education. The article in question boldly proposes to abandon the pursuit of

linguistic subtlety and to replace it by something more closely related to life. Many will be prepared to believe that the permanence of Classics in the Public School curriculum depends upon some such change of attitude. Without in any way desiring to minimise the value of accurate scholarship, it may well be argued that it is essentially the pursuit of the specialist and therefore