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The Aims of Classical Study, with Special Reference to Public Schools

T. Nicklin

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MARCH 1909

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS

THE AIMS OF CLASSICAL STUDY.

WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

NOTHING could be more satisfactory to those who are anxious that English education should be of the best than that the necessity of some agreement as to our ultimate aims is coming to be realised. In *The Year's Work in Classical Studies* Dr. Rouse writes: 'In reading the various essays of those who defend or assail the study of classics, the thought is often suggested that the writers often argue on different assumptions. Each on occasion will allude to the aims of the study, but these aims are not always the same. It is fortunate, therefore, that this year the question has begun to be discussed.'

It is obvious that a branch of education with so many diversely attractive interests may be pursued with very diverse aims, and I have heard it seriously argued that each teacher should be left with a free hand to teach in the direction of his special interests, since he will then be more likely to enlist the enthusiasm of his pupils. I cannot assent to this principle, for it is plain that the same argument would require us to allow each teacher to teach or not to teach any and every subject according to his own predilections, and, while this may be justified in the eyes of an individualist, the interests of the community make it imperative that the subjects taught and the aim in teaching

them shall be determined in the main apart from the teacher's tastes, even if the result be some loss in enthusiasm.

The questions, then, with which educationists interested in classical study are concerned are these: With what aims can Latin or Greek be studied, and with what results? Are these results all or in part indispensable to the majority of well-educated men and women in England to-day? are all or some of them only of interest as hobbies? And, finally, in view of the answers to these questions, the further question requires attention, with what aim should Latin and Greek or either of them be studied, if at all, by boys in Public Schools?

First, then, Latin and Greek may be studied, we may say, either as literature or as supplying the key to art, to political science, to ethics and metaphysics, to the history of Western civilization, to the history of Christianity, or again as a fascinating branch of science, whether in the department of palaeography, or of textual criticism and interpretation, or of archaeology prehistoric or historical, of numismatics, of grammar, or any of their subdivisions. These aims have only to be stated thus plainly for the impartial thinker to decide immediately that many of them, however attractive, are not indispensable. Even if we confine our attention to

those who are not to be trained in a primary school—and throughout this paper, I may say, I am not thinking of primary education—still there are amongst the aims just mentioned many which it is not even desirable that all pupils alike should have set before them. Various classes of students may pursue various selections from these aims. To take one instance, the University Extension student may desire some first-hand acquaintance with the masterpieces of Greek literature, and this aim will determine the order and method of his approaching the subject.

But, apart from the hobbies of later life, there is a type of culture which it is to the interest of the community to require in every member of those classes from which the Public Schools draw their pupils—*i.e.*, roughly, in all professional and public men. Unless this type be clearly determined and justified on intelligible principles, we shall never have any lasting agreement as to whether or how Latin and Greek are to be studied in the Public Schools. To me, at any rate, this type of culture requires first, an adequate command of our own language; secondly, a reasonable acquaintance with the facts of Nature and with the current theories to coordinate them; thirdly, some literary and, if possible, some artistic taste; fourthly, a tolerable knowledge of the course taken by civilization in its development; fifthly, a sufficient comprehension of the problems which have confronted and still confront men in politics, ethics, and metaphysics; and lastly, some power of conversing on everyday topics in at least one foreign language. Experience convinces me that this type can be secured in ordinary boys who remain at school till 17 or 18 years of age, if they are properly taught from the first—the failures¹ almost invariably have been improperly taught in the years before they reach the Public School.

If this ultimate aim be conceded—and I have not space here to defend it or to show

that it is in modern terms the aim proposed by our forefathers after the Revival of Letters—it is easy to fix the object with which Latin and Greek must be learnt. It will be observed that a study of the original tongues is not in this case indispensable. Dr. Rouse guessed (*School*, x. p. 98) that this might follow from my principles, but he assumed that therefore this study was indefensible as a method of attaining our ends. By all means let those who can afford to make the experiment try other methods; but for myself, I can only repeat my conviction that the experiments of the last two thousand years are sufficient to show that our first, third, fourth, and fifth ends are most easily secured, and most economically, by the old method of studying Latin and Greek, if the old method be understood to mean that translation into good English is that part of the study without which the whole is unjustifiable. The reader will have seen for himself that our fourth and fifth ends necessitate a knowledge of the great Greek and Latin writers at least in translations, and, since two other ends can be secured by the mere additional labour of making acquaintance with the original, this labour, it has been proved, is the best way to those ends.

Before passing on, it is necessary to say a word as to our second end,—the gaining of a reasonable acquaintance with the facts of Nature and with the current theories to coordinate them. Any one familiar with the history of classical learning is aware that down to the time of Bacon, Greek and Latin authors were read partly with this object. As modern discoveries increased, the authors who dealt with such subjects rightly fell out of the range of classical reading. Unfortunately, modern authors were not prescribed to take their place, and it is to this fact very largely that the disastrous narrowness of many classical scholars may be attributed, and in consequence the obscuration of the true aim of Public School classics. ‘Scholarship,’ in a word, superseded culture. This obscuration seems, indeed, to have become prevalent not earlier than the beginning of the last century, if we may judge by two significant facts. One is that Lord Byron at Harrow was not shut out, by the method

¹ For them and for those who will not remain to the age I have named, the ordinary scheme of work on the classical side of a school is neither suitable nor intended. Our five aims can, however, still be carried out for them. And with a return to the true classical system many difficulties would vanish.

of education then followed there, from an enthusiastic intimacy with English literature. The other is one to which the centenary of Corunna has called public attention. A public school man of the eighteenth century taken practically haphazard (for it was the fact of his two superior officers being incapacitated which devolved the duty upon him) wrote a report of that fight which, it has been claimed, is comparable with Caesar's Commentaries. After the eighteenth century, as I have before argued (*School*, x. p. 77), many classical teachers wandered from the way, and the essential aim of translation into good English was forgotten. How deep-seated the error has become, has been curiously illustrated by the Index to *The Year's Work*, where I am represented as writing 'on *construing*'!

Further to clear the air, it may be well to state that from this point of view Greek and Latin composition (apart from the elementary drill designed to hasten the acquisition of grammar rules and of vocabulary) must be looked on as little but a pretty exercise of the intellect,—but very fascinating to many boys, and extremely helpful towards our third end of literary taste. Experience has convinced me that verses can be mastered with infinitely greater economy of time and with equal success if boys do not begin them till they have read a great deal of the classical poets. Without doubt the principle is true of prose also.

One objection deserves to be met. It has been often argued that the classics supply an unrivalled means towards the awakening of literary taste, and apologists have been found ready to stake the case of classics on this claim. Englishmen in the mass, however, will never be convinced that Shakespeare as literature is not superior to the three Greek dramatists together; that Burke is not greater than Demosthenes (and what Public School classics make much account of the other orators?); and that the Bible in the Authorized Version is not more than Homer. And, if Aristotle be added on the classical side, it will be pointed out that he is not read for his style, so that for the average man a translation suffices, as it may for Thucydides. Or, if Thucydides' style is commended, we have Froude and Macaulay,

to say nothing of Clarendon. Plato alone is, doubtless, inimitable, but his single charms cannot outweigh the English Milton, Ruskin, and Thackeray, and if we add to Plato Cicero, Vergil, Caesar, and Horace, the balance is still redressed by Milton's verse and a score of other authors.

It will be noticed that the names which naturally suggest themselves on the classical side are mainly Greek, and this supports the view that, if experience proves that the time-table must be lightened, the sound method of doing so is by abandoning the study of Latin in the original, while our second, fourth, and fifth aims must be sought so far as Latin is concerned by means of translations. But at present there is no evidence that this is needed. What is needed is rather the speedy return to the true old aims of studying Latin and Greek,—first, oral composition in English during translation hours,—this first since it is the aim which specially legitimates the study of the original languages rather than of translations; then,¹ familiarity with history, ancient and English; immersion in philosophical thought in its widest sense; and development of literary and artistic feeling; and finally, introduction to the natural science of to-day; and this last, I may add, not in the futile fashion, attempted in the last century, of chemistry and physics lessons, but more in the form of good University Extension Lectures on astronomy, biology, and most departments of natural science.

Such aims as I have sketched correspond, it is not unfair to say, with that 'something broader, and, to our mind, more inspiring' which the critic in the *Athenaeum*, whom Dr. Rouse quotes, desires when he writes, 'A mental atmosphere is the aim; literature is subordinate to that; and in its turn, grammar is subordinate to the reading of authors . . . it spells the possibility of culture, gained by means of a wide range of information acting on the imagination.'

T. NICKLIN.

¹ The relative importance of these ends and the order in time that they may take in making their appeal to pupils, will vary with different boys. That different aims appeal at different ages has been well pointed out in the *Outlook*, 31 Jan. 1909, by a reviewer of Dr. Sandys' *History of Classical Scholarship*.