

SCIENCE.—SUPPLEMENT.

FRIDAY, JULY 16, 1886.

*ON THE PRESENT ASPECT OF CLASSICAL STUDY.*¹

THE chance that made me the first professor appointed to a chair in this university has made it my duty to represent the school of letters on this festal day, which has been chosen for the commemoration of the first completed decennium of our existence as an institution. The work of the university, so far as it can be expressed by lectures and by publications, by the number of teachers and of students, by the hours spent in laboratory and seminary, is all of record. Judged even by the census standard of facts and figures, it will be granted that what has been done here in the last ten years does not fall short of the standard which was set up in 1876. Less measurable, but not less certain, are the indications of our influence on the whole circle of university work in America; and, whatever we may have failed to do, we have assuredly not failed in rousing to greater vigilance, and stimulating to a more intense energy in other parts of the wide field; and, whether in the way of approval or in the way of protest, our example has made for life and growth and progress. This life and growth and progress have found a material expression in the erection and equipment of model laboratories for biology, chemistry, physics. Departments that are less tangible in their material and in their methods have little to show the visitor except a few books and a goodly number of men, — ardent students, who are busy with old problems and new, enriching themselves with the spoils of the past, laying up store for those who are to come after them, in the present neither envious nor afraid. As to this whole department of letters, then, — that department which has naturally fallen most under my own observation, — I can truly say that the healthy increase in the schools of language and literature is something that has transcended my most sanguine expectation. In numbers we outrank many of the minor German universities; and in the more abstruse and recondite studies, such as Assyrian and Sanscrit, we hold our own with some of the leading schools of Europe. As for our American sisters,

¹ Address delivered at the tenth anniversary of the Johns Hopkins university.

it is not so easy to separate graduate work from undergraduate work in other American universities as it is here; and hence the comparison of numbers might not be fair, and might be misinterpreted; and instead of emphasizing too much our large number of graduate students, it may be better to say in regard to all the schools of the country in which higher work is done, that we count their success as our success, for we are all helpers one of another. And here I would take occasion to echo the wish, which I have often heard expressed of late, that the university departments in all American institutions of learning might be so organized that students could pass from one to the other in the prosecution of a line of study just as they do in Germany, much to the advantage of their breadth of vision, their freedom from local or personal influence. For my own part, I have always congratulated myself that I was brought under the influence of three distinct and markedly distinct philological schools, — Berlin, Göttingen, and Bonn, — and I have no doubt that, when the time comes, there will be a university exchange that will help us even more than the measure of it that we have thus far enjoyed. We then of the department of letters have our success to speak of on this day when a little 'self-esteem grounded on just and right' may be pardonable, if not, as Milton says, profitable. But it is a success that carries with it the gravest responsibilities. The ark we bear contains more sacred vessels than it held when we set out; and on an occasion like this it becomes us not only to exchange hearty congratulations that we have been helped thus far on our way, but to renew our hold with greater vigor, and to plant our feet more firmly, with a clearer view of the path to be trod and the burden to be borne.

To some, I do not know to how many, certainly to some of those whom I am addressing, the special line of work to which my own life has been devoted may seem to have had its day; and to plan for the future of Greek is to plan for an elaborate structure on the foundation of some table rock, destined at no distant time to fall and disappear on the restless current of modern life. A monument was erected some years since to the memory of the last old woman that spoke Cornish; and it would require no great stretch of imagination on the part of some of our friends to fancy that some youth may be present here to-day who shall live to see the cremation of the last

successor of Sir John Cheke on this side of the Atlantic ; of the last old woman, trousered or untrousered, that shall have discharged the office of a professor of Greek in an American university. People who have reached a certain age, and have become somewhat reflective and prophetic, generally console themselves with Hezekiah's words. But I cannot content myself with the thought that there will be peace and truth in my days. There has not been much of either of these commodities in my first half-century, and I do not expect the market to be glutted with them in my second. Surely there is no sign that there will be any peace about Greek, or truth about Greek, in any period that I can reasonably hope to reach. But the peace and the truth that may be denied me from without are vouchsafed me abundantly from within ; and while many of my fellow-workers are in woe for the silver shrines of Diana, and mourn for the abandonment of Greek, and sorrow that the trade in text-books languishes, I am serenely standing where I stood many, many years ago, when I published my first article on the 'Necessity of the classics,' a title not to be confounded with the 'Necessities of the classics,' about which one hears far too much. I live in the abiding assurance that what is inwrought in the structure of our history and our literature must survive so long as the history of our race and the history of our language shall survive. To disentwine the warp of the classics from the woof of our life is simply impossible. One mediaeval writer every one must know, and, measured by modern standards, Dante was not a classical scholar of the first rank. His perspective of antiquity was false, his estimate of the poets of the past was far from being just ; and yet what is Dante if you loosen his hold on the classic time ? I will not speak of Milton, steeped in classic lore : I will speak of Shakspeare. None but those who have read Shakspeare with the eye of the classical scholar know how much the understanding of Shakspeare is dependent on training in the classics ; and more than once when I have hesitated as to whether it was pedantry or not to use a Greek word in my English discourse, I have turned to Shakspeare.

Is this the judgment of a man who can see only through his own narrow casement ? Scarcely had I set down those words, when the following passage fell under my eye. It is to be found in the recent introductory lecture of the professor of poetry in the University of Oxford. "The thorough study of English literature, as such, — literature, I mean, as an art, indeed the finest of the fine arts, — is hopeless unless based on an equally thorough study of the literatures of Greece and

Rome. When so based, adequate study will not be found exacting either of time or of labor. To know Shakspeare and Milton is the pleasant and crowning consummation of knowing Homer and Aeschylus, Catullus and Virgil ; and upon no other terms can we obtain it."¹

To be sure, we have promise of mountains and marvels if we break with the past. What satisfied us in our boyhood no longer suits the fastidious taste of the present ; and the Phoebus Apollo of our youth, clad as to his dazzling shoulders with a classic cloud, is shown up as nothing better than a padded dandy. Our adored Thackeray is no longer faultlessly attired in a garb of perfect English : he is simply a stylistic old beau. The plots in which we once took delight are nothing but vulgar tricks, and the lifting of a teakettle lid and the setting down of the same are intrigue enough for the conduct of a two-year-long novel. All this new literature has nothing to do with the classics. Far from it. And yet I am not at all shaken by the self-satisfied edicts of those who rule so large a portion of the reading world ; and I maintain with unwavering confidence that all healthy literature must be kept in communion, direct or indirect, with the highest exemplars of our Indo-European stock ; and if any thing could prove the necessity of a return to healthy human nature, with its compassed form, its fair red and white, it would be the utter wearisomeness of so much recent fine writing, in which there is no blood, no sap, nothing but division and subdivision of nerve-tissue. 'A pagan suckled in a creed outworn' is a joy and delight in comparison with the languid, invertebrate children of the great goddess Anaemia.

I have watched with much interest the development of the study of artistic composition in English during the last few years. Indeed, it would have been necessary to stop one's ears to keep out the shrilling cicada-sound of 'art for art's sake,' and all the theoretical buzz of aesthetic criticism. The interest has not been unmingled with amusement, because the apostles of progress are preaching very old doctrine, — a doctrine which I shall be glad to re-enforce, so far as I can, before I acquit myself of this function. Art for art's sake involves the very hardest, the very driest study, the very kind of study for which we philologists and grammarians are contemned. The accomplished master in the art of dipping, who delighted the world a few weeks since by his 'Letters to dead authors,' made his swallow-wing strong on the Elysian fields of the classics ; and those who should hold him up as an example of the kind of classical scholar we ought to have, little know to

¹ F. T. Palgrave, 'Province and study of poetry.'

what severe studies is due that easy grace. It is so cheap to talk about gerund-grinding and root-grubbing, as if gerund-grinding did not lead to the music of the spheres, and root-grubbing to the discovery of the magic moly that guards against the spells of Circe, of 'euphrasy and rue,' that purge 'the visual nerve.' He who neglects the elements lacks the first conditions of the artistic life. In the old times great artists did not disdain to prepare their own varnishes; and the old paintings stand fresh to this day, while many of their modern rivals, scarce a generation old, are falling into decay beyond the hope of recognition. The fair dream was embodied in machine pigments, and the machine pigments flake off, and with them the fair dream vanishes. If grammatical research is pressed with regard to truth, to that which is, then the gerund-grinding, as the color-grinding, not only has its warrant in itself as a useful exercise, but it is sure to be available for higher purposes; and if it is not given to every one to make use of grammatical results for artistic ends, still no organic fact is without its value, none will fail of its appropriate place in the completed system of art as of science. To me, as an ardent lover of literature, as one who was led through literature to grammar and not through grammar to literature, the fairest results of a long life of study have been the visions of that cosmic beauty which reveals itself when the infinitely little fills up the wavering outline, and the features stand out pure and perfect against the sky of God's truth. Now, for the study of literature as an art, we have every thing to learn from the old critics; and what our own Sylvester, our own Lanier, have re-discovered as to the science of verse, is a chapter from antique rhetoric. Mr. Lowell has recently pointed out the great secret of Gray's abiding popularity. That consummate master did not disdain the close analysis of the sensuous effect of sound; and the melody of Coleridge is due in a measure to a conscious though fitful study in the same line. Of late an author, whose charm of style was first appreciated in this country, has written an essay in which he applies phonetic analysis to the works of our great prose writers, and strikes the dominant chord of what seems unconscious music. The essay might have been written in the beginning of the first century as well as the end of the nineteenth, and have been signed Dionysius of Halicarnassus as well as Robert Louis Stevenson.

Whether, then, it be for the historical unity of the race, whether it be for the human sanity of classical literature, whether it be for the influence on form either as example or precept, there is no

danger that the ancient classics will be displaced from the list of studies necessary for the highest and truest culture. Nor do I think that the so-called hard and dry and minute research in this and cognate provinces of study will ever be abandoned in favor of a mere bellettristic phrasemongery about half-understood beauties. What is hard, what is dry, what is minute, depends very much on the spirit in which it is approached by the student.

Some years since, I attended a lecture by a great master. The theme was the vanishing of weak vowels in Latin. Candor compels me to state, that, although I pride myself on being interested in the most uninteresting things, I should have chosen another subject for a specimen-lecture. Candor compels me to state also that I very much question whether the illustrious teacher would accept all his own teachings to-day, such progress do grammarians make in devouring themselves as well as one another. I was much struck with the tone in which he announced his subject. It was the tone of a man who had seen the elements melt with fervent heat, and the weak vowels vanish at the sound of the last trump. The tone, indeed, seemed entirely too pathetic for the occasion; but as he went on and marshalled the facts, and set in order the long lines that connected the disappearance of the vowel with the downfall of a nationality, and great linguistic, great moral, great historical laws marched in stately procession before the vision of the student, the airy vowels that had fitted into the nowhere seemed to be the lost soul of Roman life, and the Latin language, Roman literature, and Roman history were clothed with a new meaning. And so we of the language departments do not intend to be disturbed in our work by criticism on the arid details of our courses; nor, on the other hand, are we unmindful of the larger and more popular aspects of the wide field of culture which we occupy.

There is no form of art, no phase of philosophy, of ethics, no development of physical science, that is alien to the student of language; and the student of physical science, in his turn, needs the human interest of our study to save his life from an austere and merciless quest of fact and principle in a domain where man enters only as a factor like any other factor. But first and last, the scientific standard must be upheld for the university man, be he a student of letters, be he a physicist; and that standard is the absolute truth, the ultimate truth. 'Nothing imperfect is the measure of any thing,' says the prince of idealists.¹

B. L. GILDERSLEEVE.

¹ ἀτελές γὰρ οὐδὲν οὐδεὶς μέτρον (Plato, Republic VI., 504 C).