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W. H. S. Jones

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

## THE DIRECT METHOD

Many people are certain to regard a book on the teaching of classics as almost an impertinence. If there is any well-beaten track in education, it is surely here. Thousands of teachers have followed it for generations; an elaborate system has been worked out; text-books for at least fifty years have exhibited a uniformity broken only by slight and unimportant variations. Although for about two hundred years (approximately 1500–1700) the methods of teaching classics were keenly discussed, there followed a period of comparative quiet, during which the tradition was subjected to but few attacks.

About twelve years ago, however, there arose a school of teachers who began to urge that the critics of a classical curriculum, who had been rapidly increasing both in numbers and in importance, were really assailing the wrong enemy; that they ought to have attacked, not the subject, but current methods of teaching it. The school has now several supporters, while its many enemies in the main belong to one or the other of two classes. There are, in the first place, teachers of the old school who object to the proposed change just because it is a change; convinced that a classical education is a good thing, they are unwilling to run any risks of impairing its efficacy by adopting any radical alteration of method. There are others who dislike a classical education, or who think it

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unsuitable for the great majority of boys in secondary schools. The latter class of opponents often admit that the changes are an improvement in method, but they are for this very reason all the more opposed to them. If the end be bad, they argue, the more efficacious the method of reaching that end the more strenuously it ought to be opposed as a pernicious and dangerous thing. It is therefore obvious that an explanation of the new method necessitates a full statement of the aims and principles which underlie it. Let us first consider the question historically.

It will be generally admitted that down to the eighteenth century there was an intimate relation between the classical languages, particularly Latin, and life. A man was excluded from a knowledge of nearly all professional or humanistic subjects unless he could understand the books in which such subjects were treated, and these were, with few exceptions, the Latin and Greek classics and the current Latin literature. Latin was the language of the Church, medicine, law, science, mathematics and scholarship. Accordingly, the study of Latin in schools as a propaedeutic was a necessity that nobody ever dreamed of disputing. Furthermore, there was little need for the inclusion of any other subject in the curriculum of young boys, and, as they grew older, their study of Latin was maintained by reading treatises on special subjects written in that language. A boy's theses, exercises, and often his conversations in school were generally in Latin, which was the language in which he was expected to express his own thoughts, feelings and ideas. In consequence there was a unity in the old curriculum which is entirely wanting in the amorphous mass of subjects which now goes by that name. The old

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curriculum ought to be compared, not with a modern school course, but with the course of a classical honours student at the University, which includes composition, grammar, literature and many other branches of learning, differing from one another but intimately related.

But the eighteenth century witnessed a great change, which was completed in the nineteenth. Modern languages became the medium in which learned or professional men expressed themselves, and Latin gradually ceased to be a common means of intercourse, until it survived only in the Roman Church, among scholars, and, to a very limited extent, among lawyers. In this way Latin was divorced from common life, but it continued to be studied in schools as a "mental gymnastic" and as the key to a humanising literature. Greek also, which had never been a living language in the Western world as Latin long continued to be, ceased to be of much use to professional men, as the substance of the works of Aristotle, Hippocrates and Galen was transfused into modern literatures.

Broadly speaking, the history of classical study diverges in two directions from about the time of the French Revolution. In Germany the scientific side was developed, in England the artistic side. On the one hand, there are diligent inquiries in the regions of philology, history, philosophy and archaeology; on the other hand we have the cult of the "elegant scholar," who regarded a false quantity or a clumsy phrase as almost a moral blemish. In Germany, the supreme test of attainment came to be the writing of a thesis on some more or less important point in classical antiquities; in England, the examination system had a very powerful influence upon the methods of teaching. It is the tendency of examiners

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to ask questions that are easily corrected, and translation from one language to another lends itself readily to this purpose. So true is this, that translation papers from English into Latin or Greek are actually called exercises in composition, although strictly speaking they involve no composition—that is, no self-expression—at all, but merely a transference of another man's thoughts from one language to another. In fact, the more thoroughly a candidate eliminates his own thoughts when doing such a piece of translation the more faithfully he does his work. A passage of Shakespeare is best rendered into Greek Iambics when the translator suppresses his own personality and tries to write as Sophocles or Euripides would have written. The translator's mind must not be creative.

The demand for translation in higher examinations has affected methods of teaching down to the beginners' stage. The consequence is, that right through his course the learner of classics is concerned with finding equivalents in one language for words of another, and there is a strong tendency for him to forget or to overlook the realities for which these words stand. The truth of this statement is manifest upon the inspection of almost any batch of papers sent up at public examinations. A large percentage of candidates will be found who have written sheer nonsense, having failed to realise that anything is necessary except to find words to represent other words. Moreover, it may well be doubted whether translation is a good instrument of education before the learner's mind is alive to its serious difficulties. Very few words in any language have exact equivalents in any other; so much of the force of a word depends upon its traditional associations. "Friend" in English and φίλος in Greek afford a typical

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example. Of course when an advanced scholar, aware of these difficulties, undertakes a piece of translation, he is engaged on an exercise at once profitable and enjoyable; but to allow a beginner to do little else but substitute one expression for another throughout the course of his school life, before his mind can appreciate the necessary imperfection of the results he obtains, is to train him in inaccurate reasoning, and to make him divorce language from the realities it represents.

There is, at any rate, a general dissatisfaction with the results of a classical education. It is said that those who achieve success are often narrow in mind and mechanical in their modes of thought, and, what is worse, the number of failures, who learn practically nothing and cordially detest the little that they do know, is far too great to justify the continuance of the subject in the curriculum of an ordinary school of the secondary type.

Supporters of the reformed method admit that there is much truth in this charge, but they are convinced that most of the fault lies with the present method of treating words apart from the things of which words are mere symbols. Accordingly they would keep Latin for many boys and Greek for a select few, and they would substitute for translation direct association of words with things during the earlier stages at least, and to a certain extent also in the later stages. They rely upon two impulses, which they endeavour carefully to develop, the impulse to understand and the impulse to express one's own thoughts. If by this means a learner of ordinary ability can be trained to appreciate a few classical masterpieces, not only their contents but also the beauty and power of the language in which they are written; if, at the same time, he can learn to express himself in a language that

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is unrivalled for business-like precision and lucidity, a language, moreover, which will form the basis of his linguistic studies, uniting them into an organised whole, then, and perhaps only then, can Latin and Greek claim an honourable place in a liberal education.

What position in the curriculum should Latin and Greek occupy? Latin must be considered apart from the sister tongue, because few, if any, maintain at the present time that the two tongues are so indissolubly connected that one is useless without the other. Reformers would retain Latin for such boys as will study at least two other foreign languages in the course of their career, in fact for those whose education will be in the main literary. Not only is it important that such boys should have a knowledge of ancient life and thought, but the Latin language itself forms the best possible focus round which linguistic studies can arrange themselves. A language so lucid, precise and business-like has no rival as a means of inculcating those principles of language with which every linguist must be familiar. The mother tongue, at any rate English, though it may teach the simpler elements of general grammar, is not sufficient by itself. A language is required in which the ordinary grammatical categories are clearly marked, and for this purpose Latin is unrivalled. Latin, then, is to be studied primarily for its linguistic value, and secondarily for the content of its best literature. Greek, on the other hand, will be reserved for those few boys who have distinct literary tastes, and the linguistic training afforded by Latin should be employed in securing a rapid and easy mastery of the other language.

The question may also be regarded from another point of view. Reformers look upon education as the placing

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of a pupil in a series of environments, so as to stimulate the mind to react, and therefore to grow. Contact with the great things of the world, the great facts of nature, and the great achievements of man, is their ultimate aim. The ancient classical literatures, ancient history and civilisation, together with the Latin and Greek tongues, are undoubtedly among the great things of the world, and a knowledge of them is the key to much of our modern life and thought.

A formulation of the reformers' principles must now be given. They base their methods upon the two impulses already mentioned, the impulse to *understand*, and the impulse towards *self-expression*. They desire their lessons to satisfy a real want in their pupils' minds, namely, the wish to express themselves and the wish to understand the thoughts of others. Interest in the work is thus fundamental. This does not mean that hard work is eliminated, but merely that hard work ceases to be drudgery and becomes a pleasure when it happens to be the only means of attaining the desired end. The young learner, then, must not regard his work as a dreary wilderness far removed from the pleasant garden of his own imagination. In the second place, reformers remember that all languages are *tongues*, and that much of their force is lost when they cease to be spoken. This is especially true of Latin and Greek, for most of the great classical authors intended their works to be heard rather than read privately in the study. Oral work, then, plays a large part in the "direct method." Finally, translation as a means of learning a language is abandoned, in order to bring about the direct association of words with reality. Translation, however, still has a part to play. In the earlier stages it is used as a test, to find out whether fresh

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knowledge has been assimilated; in the later stages it is practised as a literary exercise.

It will be seen that the direct method utilises all the means by which knowledge can reach the brain. It trains not only eyes, but ears and vocal organs. The important part played by the last in mental development has been but recently emphasised by physiologists.

The direct method is not to be identified with the "picking up" or even the neglect of grammar. It is not, or need not be, unsystematic. These points will be dealt with in the following chapters; in the meantime it will be enough to correct a common misconception.

In 1911 and 1912 there were held at Bangor "summer schools" for the reform of Latin teaching, which resulted in the formation of an Association for that purpose. This association appointed a committee to frame a definition of the direct method, and to consider in particular its application to Latin. The report is here reprinted, with the kind permission of the Editor of *Latin Teaching*.

REPORT TO THE ASSOCIATION FOR THE REFORM  
OF LATIN TEACHING OF THE COMMITTEE AP-  
POINTED TO DEFINE "THE DIRECT METHOD."

We have been asked to attempt a definition of the Direct Method with a view to helping discussions in which the term is used in connexion with the teaching of Latin.

In undertaking such a definition, we were faced by two preliminary questions, (1) the relation of the term "direct" to other terms sometimes used, such as "natural" and "oral," (2) the method of reaching a definition, whether by deduction from first principles or by a Socratic induction from the common use of the term.



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USE OF THE TERMS "NATURAL," "ORAL," AND  
"DIRECT."

In the earlier advocacy of a change in the methods of teaching modern languages the terms "natural" and "oral" are frequently used; their gradual abandonment in favour of the term "direct" seems to be largely due to certain misunderstandings to which they were liable.

The term "natural" was intended to suggest that the pupil should acquire a foreign language in much the same manner as he acquired his own vernacular. But it was soon apparent that the phrase "the natural method" laid itself open to a telling retort by the opponents of change, viz., that the way in which a child learns his mother-tongue is not by a method but by the absence of method. The reformers were fully aware that they could never reproduce in the class-rooms the exact conditions under which a child learns his own language, that the only way he could learn a foreign language "naturally" was by staying in the country in which it is spoken. As the French Circular of 1901 puts it, "while it [the direct method] approximates very nearly to the natural means of acquiring a language, it must be used as a true method, that is to say, in accordance with a definite and graduated plan."

The term "oral" brought out one important element in the proposed changes, but it needed constant explanation. The circular just quoted is obliged to explain: "the oral method does not exclude the reading of texts or written exercises; nor does it rest in abeyance during such exercises: on the contrary, it is to be applied to them."

Eventually the term "direct" was adopted in England to express an attribute applicable throughout, the absence of any "indirect" approach through the medium of the vernacular. It seems less open to objection than the French term "intuitive," which implies the absence of any conscious process of reasoning in reading the correct form, and therefore raises some difficult psychological problems on which we shall touch later.

## METHOD OF REACHING A DEFINITION.

Though we have stated the original intention of the authors of the term "direct," it may be reasonably maintained that its meaning is much less self-evident than that of the terms "natural," "oral" and "intuitive," and that, whatever it may mean etymologically, it now means just what it is commonly used by its exponents to mean and no more. This leads us to our second preliminary point, the means which we are to employ to reach a definition.

If we could assume in starting that supporters and opponents of the direct method had the same end in view, and that the methods of each were only rival means of securing that end, we should unhesitatingly say that the meaning could be determined solely by the use. But, if adherence or opposition to the method is or can be determined by differences of opinion as to the end in view, or if either party is vague as to its end, then even if the question of the end has not been prominently brought into view in the discussions on the teaching of modern languages, it appears possible that it may suddenly be found to assume a very important place in the controversy as to the application of the method to a new subject-matter, where certain tacit assumptions which may have been made in the case of modern languages may be explicitly called in question.

## QUESTIONS AS TO THE AIM OF THE DIRECT METHOD.

We feel that our report will be of little value to the Association if we attempt to pass lightly over controversial points; that, if suppressed, they are bound in some form or other to crop up again, and that they had best be faced at the outset.

It is not merely an allegation made by the opponents of the application of the direct method to the teaching of Latin, but an assertion which was once frequently made by upholders of the direct method in its application to modern languages, that the reason for teaching a language