

## I

## INTRODUCTION

## 1. WHY WE TEACH THE CLASSICS

‘Latin and Greek are not dead languages; they have merely  
 ceased to be mortal.’ (J. W. MACKAIL)

‘IN a broken world we are fortunate that we have kept our classical inheritance.’<sup>1</sup> So wrote in 1945 a distinguished President of the Classical Association, no *laudator temporis acti*, but a man known in other realms of activity as well as in the world of classical studies. It is in the belief that he sets forth that the present volume has been written, to render in all due humility what aid we can to those who endeavour to pass on to our successors that fortunate inheritance.

‘Fortunate?’ comments the critic. ‘Is it not unfortunate rather than in these times, when so many new paths are being opened up before mankind, when scientific developments hitherto beyond the reach of man’s imagination have been made possible, when opportunities for power over the material world as yet undreamed of have been set within man’s grasp, there should still be found men of intelligence and learning whose eyes are turned backward rather than forward? Why now of all times turn a backward gaze on civilizations and literature, arts and achievements past, over and done with?’

Yet lovers of the Classics stand secure in the knowledge of their good fortune, and are not to be argued out of their birthright quite so easily. New paths there are and new opportunities, as none will deny. Only a hermit or recluse would turn his back for ever on the modern world. On the other hand even the scientist cannot wholly cut himself off from the past, but must feel his way carefully along the roads indicated by his predecessors. So too it has been said of the Classics, that not their least value is that they

<sup>1</sup> Sir Maurice Bowra, Presidential Address to the Classical Association, 1945.

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supply us with a record of completed experiments. Nor were these experiments with the material world alone, but experiments with humanity itself.

The antiquity of the records cannot diminish their validity. It may indeed be argued that the very age of the story they have to tell constitutes its virtue. The experiments have been carried through to the end. We know the issue of the tale; we can view its unfolding in a true perspective. Again, as we look upon the world of Greece and Rome we behold a world in miniature. Relatively to the modern world their activities were limited and their achievements on a tiny scale. This very characteristic makes them more easy of comprehension. Their records are brief and their ways almost endearingly simple. As we examine the picture we find that the foreground is not cluttered up with distracting detail. Classical literature is indeed reputed for its objectivity, which is only matched by the objectivity with which the dispassionate reader may now study the story. Our own mental camera is not obscured by the kind of emotional prejudices which can fog the picture when we study our national history or present-day affairs. It is not suggested for a moment that only the civilizations of Greece and Rome are worthy of our study. The zealous propagation of such extravagances in an earlier generation has done much harm. Unless, however, we are to bow to the doctrine that all 'history is bunk', that human nature has radically changed, that all past experience is valueless, we must claim that the civilizations of Greece and Rome must still be studied with sympathy and understanding. 'With understanding' is a most important qualification, because such understanding is not fully possible without some knowledge of the language and literature of the two peoples. The aim of such study will be more than a mere antiquarian curiosity; among other things it will include a search for a standard with which to compare our own developing culture, wherein if in some respects the ancient civilization seems to fall short of our own we shall find cause for humble thankfulness rather than arrogant contempt.

But there is more in the study of the Classics than this. Great and important as are the lessons they have to teach us, we turn to

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Greece and Rome not only for instruction but also for enjoyment. The fact is that the achievements of the Greeks and Romans in art, architecture and literature have by their intrinsic beauty moved men through the changing fashions of two thousand years to wonder, pity and delight. It will doubtless be said that such an end is attainable even without a knowledge of Greek and Latin. One may remain innocent of the declensions and still admire the massive and efficient grandeur of a Roman aqueduct, without knowing the Greek alphabet one may be charmed by the balanced grace of a Greek temple or enthralled by the exquisite but unaffected perfection of an Attic red-figure vase. Yet strangely enough this contention is true only up to a point. Appreciation based on imperfect understanding is apt to wear thin. The Greekless and Latinless soon begin to be aware, however dim their apprehension, that something is missing, and the realization grows with their increasing mastery of these tongues that their enjoyment is keener and their appreciation truer the more they can hear and understand the language of the people who wrought these masterpieces.

Yet Greek and Latin are not studied merely to heighten the appreciation of art and architecture. Much of this part of the legacy of antiquity has suffered from the ravages of time, and in any case few of us can go to Athens or to Rome to see the shattered glory of the Parthenon or the mutilated and shabby grandeur of the Colosseum. The literatures of the two peoples must surely be conceded to be the noblest and at the same time the most durable part of our heritage. We are nearer to the past when in our own homes we look over Atticus' shoulder to read a gossipy letter from Cicero, or chuckle with Plato at Socrates poking gentle fun at Protagoras, than when we stand gazing at the silent stones of the Forum or stumble breathlessly over the Acropolis on a conducted tour.

If a real appreciation of classical art and architecture is to some extent dependent on a knowledge of Greek and Latin, the same, but without any qualification, is *a fortiori* true of classical literature. Voices will be raised on behalf of translations, a field in which it is difficult for the expert to carry conviction to the layman. Never-

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theless, the truth must be told even at the risk of appearing to be dogmatic. Translations are rarely anything but a shadow of the original. They may perhaps give us the content or even some general impression of a work. But the excellence of classical literature, particularly of poetry, lies not in the story so much as the manner of its telling. The magic of Virgil's word-pictures, the subtle ellipses and elegant rapidity of Sophoclean dialogue, 'the surge and thunder of the *Odyssey*' defy translation, however skilful, and can only be transmitted in the authentic tones of Greece and Rome. Like the melodies and harmonies of the great composers, the music of classical literature is preserved in writing and in print, to be brought to life in all its majesty, grace and charm for those who can read and interpret the score. But in a world where nobody understood musical notation or the Greek and Latin languages, the voices of Bach and Mozart, of Homer and Catullus would be stilled.

Primarily we study the Classics because the works written in those languages are beautiful and good, and the contemplation of the beautiful and good is a noble exercise of the highest faculties. Has the process of learning those languages any inherent value to the learner other than what may be gained from the acquisitions themselves? Much ink and many words have been spent in discussing whether and to what extent the training acquired in one subject is transferable to some different sphere. It is generally conceded that men trained in the Classics have achieved remarkable success in conspicuously diverse fields. Those who would contest the claims put forward on behalf of the Classics attribute such success to natural gifts rather than any particular type of training. It appears to be difficult to prove or disprove such contentions either way. To those who gird at the Classics on the grounds of difficulty it may be said that modern educational psychology admits that it is as evil not to stretch the wits enough as to stretch them too far, and that the plastic mind of youth is better filled than left empty. When all is said there remains the argument summarized in the 1921 *Report on the Value of Classics* that they provide a course of training which requires the exercise of many different powers of the mind, and forms a remarkable combination

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of memory-training, imagination, aesthetic appreciation and scientific method, and an invaluable habit of thinking out the real meaning of words.

It is here in fact that the Classics can make a most valuable contribution to Education. The pursuit of that modern elixir in Education, 'non-verbal ability', has gone to such lengths that there is a danger of a generation growing up in our midst to whom words are becoming in an increasing degree uncomprehended and incomprehensible. It would indeed be ironic if the achievement of this century were to perfect the means of communication while inadvertently killing by neglect the meaning of communications. The learning of an inflexional language can be a useful corrective here. A study that calls for a close inspection of the written word, for careful scrutiny instead of 'the once-over'—that characteristic coinage of recent times—for disciplined thinking in place of slipshod guesswork, is a study that has its part to play in keeping the jungle back from civilization. The skills that Latin demands are sorely needed in a world where loose thought and careless speech are rife. If the study of Latin be continued for only four, three, or even two years, in this time something of a corrective dose can be administered. As a subject for study by a wide range of pupils the disciplinary value of Latin—and we stand by the phrase undaunted by boggy-words—is its greatest educational asset.

The difficulty of attempting to put the classical case in a few paragraphs is almost insuperable, but it is hoped that some inkling of it has by now been given. Perhaps the greatest weakness of the presentation of the Classics in the past has been the failure to relate them sufficiently to other subjects, and some observations on this will follow. It would be a real loss if men of classical learning ceased to exist, and it would be a sub-human world if great literature and great achievements were no longer valued for their own sake, and no longer received admiration, respect and imitation—even, on the humblest plane, the perhaps grudging imitation of the schoolboy grappling with his Latin exercise. Yet the value of the Classics is the greater as they are constantly related to present and future problems. While we urgently need our knowledge of the physical sciences, of the history of our own country

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and its neighbours, of the language, literature and culture of our contemporaries and of ourselves, we also need all the guidance of the past that we can squeeze into so crowded a field. To disregard the models and completed experiments of antiquity is needless folly. The problem now is how to find time to acquire and digest all the knowledge that will help us. We shall be called upon, whether we wish it or not, to prune and select ruthlessly; economic pressure may force us to give priority to subjects offering quick returns and material gains. Yet surely the difference between the civilized man and the savage is that the former takes a longer and a wider view. The greatest danger of our complex civilization lies in its forcing of the individual into the narrow lines of specialization, 'knowing more and more about less and less', until outside his own particular subject he is forced into reliance upon the expert. He is left with no standards of his own and has no faith in his own individual choice. In a word he has lost his liberty. That is why somehow or other room must be made in our Education for the teaching of the Classics in all their comprehensiveness. Moreover, all, not just a favoured few, must be encouraged to approach them. These ends must be constantly borne in mind by the teacher, and even through the early drudgery—and what subject of value can dispense with its basic technique?—and even to childish minds, some of the inspiration can be transmitted.

To sum up in one phrase, the fortunate inheritance of the Classics may seem to savour of the wildest optimism. Perhaps it may be said that they represent some episodes in man's history when he was at his best, when the individual counted for most, when in spite of limited resources he achieved the most, when the material was most subjected to the spiritual. If the aim of Education be correctly defined as being to give a knowledge of the best and noblest things done or said in the world, then Education must keep a place for the Classics or be untrue to itself. How that place may best be used the rest of this volume attempts to show.

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## 2. CLASSICS AND THE LINK WITH OTHER SUBJECTS

‘O that I had but followed the Arts!’ (*Twelfth Night*)

‘Historically we are, to a greater extent than we ever realize, the children of Greece, in literature, in art, in thought, in ethics, in politics and notably in religion’ (GILBERT MURRAY)

This book exists to proclaim that the Classics are worth studying in themselves. But it is worth observing that their study makes the study of other subjects more profitable, not least by teaching that the division of the sum of knowledge into ‘subjects’ is in itself unsatisfactory. It might indeed be claimed that Latin and Greek, rightly interpreted, are not so much subjects in themselves as the foundation of other subjects. This is most plain of course in literature, especially in poetry, whether of England or of any Western European country, but it is just as true of other and more practical subjects. To expound this doctrine thoroughly would require a bulky volume, but what now follows may briefly indicate some of the lines of approach.

Let us begin with that subject on which some claim that the hours devoted to Classics might be more profitably spent. ‘Instead of wasting time on Latin and Greek’, they say, ‘teach your pupils English properly. Make them practise writing good English, not bad Latin prose; encourage them to read their own poets and not those of the ancient past, who lived in a world now remote.’ (The present writers would assert that the ancient world is remote only on time charts, not in its influence nor its consequences, but that is another matter.) Consider first then English.

English can of course be well spoken and written and intelligently read by people who do not consciously know a single word of Latin or Greek. But it may be affirmed that those who do possess such knowledge gain an additional awareness of their native language. You can use correctly the word ‘invidious’ or ‘palatial’ or ‘synoptic’ without knowing their derivation, but you do not perfectly apprehend them. And the line ‘O mother Ida, many-fountained Ida’ may be judged simply as a line of English verse—but it is much more than that. The line ‘The Spartans on the sea-wet rock sat down and combed their hair’

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is in its context perfectly pointless unless Thermopylae means something to you. A passage in Milton such as:

...pleasing was his shape,  
 And lovely, never since of serpent-kind  
 Lovelier, not those that in Illyria changed  
 Hermione and Cadmus; nor to which transformed  
 Ammonian Jove or Capitoline was seen,  
 He with Olympias, this with her who bore  
 Scipio the highth of Rome.

is so much indebted to the Classics both in substance and in form as to be merely unintelligible without classical training, or some synthetic substitute for it. We may indeed be in danger of losing the power to understand our own poets.

Such passages as these, chosen almost at random, will be enough to remind us how much English literature, and especially English poetry, owes to the classical influence. It should be our aim from the beginning to make it possible for a boy to enter easily and as of right upon the whole of his heritage. And if we allow that the other literatures of Europe are part of the family heritage, then we may claim that in teaching a boy Latin (and Greek too) we are helping him to claim his share of the Romance languages as well.

How far this presentation of the Classics can be achieved must inevitably depend upon the circumstances of each school. But even if the time available is limited, something can be done at all stages of classical study, especially where there is easy co-operation between classical teachers and those responsible for the other studies with which it is suggested that the classical work should be linked.

For instance, in the Sixth Form a useful term's work can be done on oratory, involving samples of the art chosen from three or four languages, ancient and modern; or a study of a Greek tragedy can be combined with a glance at Aristotle's *Poetics* and some specimens of the French classical drama; Ovid can be made to throw light on English poetry, Plutarch upon Shakespeare. What matters is that our classical studies should not be conducted in



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a closed compartment and that our pupils should learn from the beginning to pass from the ancient world to the modern and back again with something of the unconscious ease with which such a transition was made by Dryden or Shelley, Burke or Dr Johnson. This is never to be achieved by the sedulous application of the pupil to handbooks or the deliberate inculcation of 'background' by a teacher of English or of History. It must be natural growth whose root is in a grasp of the ancient culture, not necessarily wide but certainly firm. To acquire a knowledge of the sources in this way is pleasanter, surer and more scholarly than to excavate them from commentaries and footnotes. And it may be doubted whether there is any other way by which a boy may come to understand something of the sweep and continuity of the cultural traditions of which our generation is the inheritor.

A second subject that is, or should be, inextricable from Classics is of course Divinity. Not for nothing have the Churches long included in the training of their ministers a knowledge of classical languages. Much of the New Testament was originally written in Greek; much of the Old transmitted to us through the Greek Septuagint version. It was in the Greco-Roman world that Jesus lived and St Paul travelled. Use the Greek Testament or the Vulgate as an occasional reader in junior classical forms—they are not difficult, and some boys at least will remember the translation—and see the result. Or in the Sixth link up with the Pauline Epistles the Greek and Roman moral codes; perhaps compare with Marcus Aurelius' writings in the next century. In tracing forward the growth of Christianity notice how often the spread of the Christian and the revival of the classical traditions went hand in hand, despite their apparent conflict. Recall that the international outlook of the Roman Catholic Church springs from the supratribal outlook of the Roman Empire at its best. Or trace back the growth of pagan and Hebrew moral codes and see their varied reactions to similar problems.

But the value of intelligent classical training and knowledge is not limited to these two most obvious examples. Its use in throwing cross-shafts of illumination, alike down the main paths or into the obscure corners, is apparent in almost every subject.

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In some branches of learning this illumination is most valuable at the Advanced Level, at the stage where synthesis of ideas becomes as essential as, if not more essential than, mastery of facts. But this is not everywhere so. A boy does not need to be studying comparative philology, nor even to be aware that such a science exists, to derive both interest and practical use from the fact that Latin is the direct ancestor, not merely of many English words, but of five modern national languages, the so-called Romance languages ('What an odd name!', thinks the non-Latinist)—French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and Roumanian, as well as of Provençal, Catalan, Corsican and Swiss Romansch and Ladin. Utilitarian instances are best taken from French, as the most commonly studied of these. The debt of French literature to the Classics is even more manifest than that of English literature and need not be treated here in detail. As for vocabulary, one who knows many words in Latin finds that he knows many in any Romance tongue; his reading is simplified and accelerated. If one descends to a quite junior level one finds that at least one stumbling-block in learning French accurately, those apparently irrational genders, is more easily surmounted by the pupil who knows and applies his Latin. One wonders why the pen for instance should be *la plume*, till one connects it with the Latin *pluma*, first declension and so almost certainly feminine; or *la raison* from *ratio* (abstract noun in *-io*, feminine); or *la liberté* from *libertas* (abstract in *-tas*, feminine). Latin, in short, follows comprehensible rules, but French follows derivations. Surely, if you happen to know even elementary Latin, much labour is saved by recalling that masculine and feminine genders in French are usually (unhappily not always) the same as in Latin and that Latin neuters usually become masculine in French. Examples of this type of correlation could be indefinitely multiplied from any Romance language, and the student with a good foundation of Latin finds his learning much simplified. It is a tragic example of the modern fragmentation of knowledge that so few teachers are qualified to apply in practical detail and not merely in lip service the direct descent of modern European languages from a common ancestor.

The debt of modern languages to Greek is less obvious—at any