

**THE RIGHT METHOD OF  
STUDYING THE GREEK AND  
LATIN CLASSICS. THE  
CHANCELLOR'S ESSAY, 1887.**

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THE CHANCELLOR'S ESSAY,

1887,

BY

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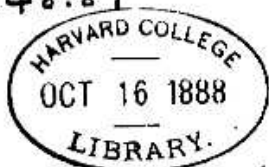
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## THE RIGHT METHOD OF STUDYING THE GREEK AND LATIN CLASSICS.

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NOT many years ago the question of the right method of studying the Greek and Latin Classics seemed likely to be put for ever out of sight by the graver enquiry whether the Greek and Latin Classics should be studied at all. The awakening of the popular mind to the educational possibilities of natural science was accompanied by a tendency to disparage unduly the value of the old learning, a tendency which acquired additional strength from the unwise and imprudent opposition with which the claims of the innovators were met in some quarters. It must be admitted that neither side of the controversy was entirely free from blame. It should have been possible to call attention to the importance of a neglected subject of study without extolling it in language that might have been taken from the advertisement of some marvellous pill. It should also have been possible to defend the supremacy of the Classics without insisting upon the continued interdiction of a study that was not too frivolous to gain the attention of Aristotle and Pliny. The fears of the friends of classical study were not, however, altogether groundless. An appeal was made to the practical common-sense, so-called, of the English people. In the eyes of "practical" men the ideal education is that which would best enable a man to obtain food and shelter if cast alone on a desert island. It is forgotten that it is not given to all of us to live on desert islands; and that to the great majority of Englishmen, whose lives are destined to be spent in a civilised country, that education is not wholly unpractical which produces the perfect man though it may fail to create the perfect mechanic. In spite of all fears, the event has shown that, if science has gained much, the Classics have lost nothing. There was never a time when classical learning appealed to the sympathies of so large a proportion of the population. When we think of the manifest progress in the direction of the popularising of science, there is some danger of our overlooking the fact that classical instruction, too, has now reached many classes of society which, not long since, it hardly touched at all. The University Local Examinations, for instance, have stimulated the study of Classics in schools which would otherwise have been given over entirely to a non-classical course, and have afforded to promising students opportunities of distinction which in many cases have led to the Universities themselves those who, but for these examinations,

would have had no suspicion of the gift that was in them. So, too, the University of London, although regarded by some writers as another University of Louvain, would be justified in claiming that, during the fifty years of its history, it has greatly aided this popularising of classical study, especially by its influence on professional and middle-class education. It is surely better that a man should have carefully studied but two or three masterpieces of Greek and Latin literature—even though he be unable to speak with authority on the history of the iambic trimeter or on the use of the caesura—than that he should have no knowledge of the Classics at all. Even the colleges that of late years have sprung up so rapidly in many great manufacturing towns, although naturally giving most attention to science, do not neglect the humanities. In most institutions of this kind, evening classes, in Classics as well as other subjects, have been established for the benefit of persons whose occupations prevent them from attending lectures during the day. The University Extension movements may be expected to do much, even in a few years, for the spread of classical instruction among the working-classes. A lecturer of ten years' experience in connexion with the London Society for the Extension of University Teaching has expressed a conviction that if a popular institution for the study of Greek and Latin were opened in London it would be crowded with eager students. At a time when Leeds artisans are willing to conclude a day's hard work by attendance at an evening class in Plato's Republic, it seems that the furtherance of classical study among the masses, so far from being a lost cause, is really a cause that is only in the first stage of a development, the end of which no one can foresee.

Before discussing the right method of studying any subject, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the aim that we propose to reach by its study. To say that this proposition is a truism is not to say that it does not need to be insisted upon repeatedly; for the fact that such a necessity is obvious has not always prevented a practical neglect of the enquiry which it demands. In no branch of education has there hitherto been suggested a method which is absolutely the best for all persons at all times and for all purposes. History is not exactly the same study to a Member of Parliament who seeks from it guidance with regard to the vote that he should give at a national crisis, and to a dabbler in numismatics who desires no greater light than is sufficient to clear up the difficulties contingent on the arrangement of a collection of coins. The nature of musical study varies according as the student desires to leave behind him the enduring possession of a classical oratorio, or the memory of momentary triumphs of brilliant execution. Illustrations might be accumulated from almost every pursuit under the sun, and the same principle—namely, that of Aristotle,



that it is necessary *τῆν ἀκριβείαν μὴ ὁμοίως ἐν ἅπασιν ἐπιζητεῖν, ἀλλ' ἐν ἑκάστῳ . . . ἐπὶ τοσαύτων ἐφ' ὅσον αἰετῶν τῇ μεθόδῳ*—holds good with regard to classical study. A man who intends to apply his energies to the task of enlarging the existing body of knowledge—who means, in short, to give himself to research—is justified in prosecuting a course of study which would be a mere waste of time to any one whose ambition turns in other directions. Much of the seeming failure of classical study has been due to the neglect of this distinction. The prophetic eye of school-masters and tutors has too often seen a possible professor in every boy placed under their care, with the consequence that their curriculum has been adapted to the needs of a very small minority of their pupils.

This essay will not pretend to discuss the course of classical study that should be adopted in the training of what may be called classical specialists, but will attempt to consider what method should be employed in the instruction of the great majority of classical students, those, namely, who seek by the enlightened study of the Greek and Latin authors to acquire what is commonly known as "culture." It is easier to write about this "culture" than to define it. Education, as a whole, has never been better defined than by Milton:—"I call a complete and generous education that which fits a man to perform justly, skilfully, and magnanimously, all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war." Modern critics would probably object to this as a definition of culture; they would say that it savours too much of a Philistine admiration of utility. At any rate, if culture does not mean all this, there can be no doubt that all this means culture,—physical, intellectual, and moral. Milton's definition, however, is after all only translated into the language of the nineteenth century when it is said of culture that it is the pursuit of perfection, this perfection being defined as the full, free and symmetrical development of the complex and many-sided nature and life of man. It must be a training and finishing of the whole man; it must end in the production of *εὐφροσύνη*, or a finely-tempered nature. To effect this harmonious development it is plain that a variety of plastic agencies must be set at work. The proper combination and direction of these agencies is the problem of education. Whatever definition of culture we may adopt, the all important thing is to remember that the aim of the student must be to cultivate, not letters or science, but himself.

It has generally been allowed that the study of the Greek and Latin classic authors is the royal road to mental culture. This hardly admits of definition, any more than culture in general. Like good breeding, its possession is indicated as much by the absence of certain negative, as by the presence of certain positive, qualities. It is neither force nor insight, nor even knowledge; but it is a peculiar tone or habit of mind shown in

an appreciation of the proportion of things, an appropriation of the noblest traditions of the past, and a delicacy of mental touch. Some advocates of classical education have even claimed for it a surpassing influence in moral culture. Habitual converse with the Classics tends, it has been asserted, "to impart to character a certain grandeur and generosity, removed from the spirit of cabal and mean cunning which prevail among men of the world." Unfortunately, stubborn facts prove only too clearly that the secret of good behaviour is not to be found in the *Poetae Scenici* any more than in the Differential Calculus. Without going so far as to confirm the opinion of Cicero's grandfather, who held that the more Greek a man knew the greater rascal he turned out, one may venture to call attention to the notorious fact that the "spirit of cabal and mean cunning" shown in the lives of some distinguished classical scholars has given occasion to the enemies to blaspheme rather than to acknowledge the sweet reasonableness of classical culture. Of course there is this amount of truth in the argument for the moral improvement resulting from classical study,—that all true mental culture widens the range of possible extrinsic moral influences, by increasing the number of points at which such inspiration may touch us, and by strengthening and enlarging the faculties which may be stimulated and directed to worthy moral ends. However, that mental as distinct from moral culture is especially promoted by the study of the Greek and Latin authors cannot well be denied. The analysis of this superiority, as performed by various investigators, has resulted in the detection of so many different elements of excellence that a cynic might be pardoned for suggesting that this is one of the cases in which, according to the prudent maxim of Lord Mansfield, we should beware of attempting to state the grounds of our judgments. In some points, however, the educational value of classical study admits of no doubt. In the first place it must be admitted to possess the advantages connected with study of any kind, such as, for instance, the formation of habits of industry, method, and the like; also the communication of the power to drudge at distasteful work for the sake of a distant result. Reference may next be made to the benefits derived from the careful study of any language. Then, there are the special advantages inseparable from the study of any foreign language, summed up with pardonable hyperbole by the Emperor Charles V. as the acquirement of a new soul. Lastly, we have the invaluable training which is the result of the serious and constant perusal of a noble literature. But the study of the language and literature of the Greeks and Romans provides a discipline with which the study of any other language and literature is unable to compete. The linguistic training furnished by languages of looser structure is not to be compared with that which is afforded by the Greek and Latin tongues. The ac-

complishment of fluent speech in every language of modern Europe may bring with it a much smaller acquaintance with the principles of philology than is involved in a thorough, if even elementary, study of Latin grammar. So too, it must be remembered that the Greek language, considered as a work of art, is absolutely the best: "it is the only tongue," as has been well said, "that has the texture of marble." Moreover the classical literatures, considered of course as literature quite apart from the "information" they convey, have not yet been surpassed. To forego the study of the masterpieces of antiquity would be to cut ourselves off deliberately from the opportunity of looking at the very highest models, the perfection of literary art, the standard which should be a perpetual rebuke to everything lax or slipshod in thought or execution. As recent years have seen the publication of many unusually skilful and workmanlike translations of the Classics, it may be desirable to remind a lazy generation that the best translation cannot reproduce the general tone and feeling—much less the more delicate *nuances*—of the original. If the ancient authors could see the cleverest modern translations of their works, it would have to be said of them that "mirantur novas frondes et non sua poma." There are recorded instances in which men of undoubted genius have been led to confess that they have been more astonished at the wonderful capacity and industry of the translator than at the wisdom of the original writer.

If the aim of classical study be such as has been asserted and its advantages such as have been described, it will be plain that the right method of studying the Greek and Latin authors will be that which combines in due proportion the proper study of the languages and that of the literatures. Of course, it is difficult to say where the study of a language ends and that of its literature begins; but, at the risk of some cross-divisions, it will be necessary for the purposes of this discussion to treat each branch of study as in some sense independent.

Not a few writers have exhibited a tendency to deny the value of a thorough study of the grammar of the classical languages. Stress has been laid on the intolerable drudgery involved in a long course of tuition in uninteresting grammatical rules and examples. It has been alleged that by its irksomeness it creates a distaste for the study to which it is intended to serve as an introduction, and that it provokes a deplorable reaction. In some cases, it is to be feared, the indolence of the emancipated adult shrinks so sensitively from exertion of any kind that, by the natural operation of the principle of association, it is pained by the mere reminiscence of compulsory exertion during boyhood. Be that as it may, the argument appears to be of force against injudicious methods of grammatical instruction and not against grammatical instruction in itself. If Gibbon purchased his knowledge of the Latin syntax "at