

On A Classical Education

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I wish to convince you this evening, if any of you need convincing, that the soundest basis of education for children who have passed the elementary stage is a study of the ancient languages and literatures of Rome and Greece. Children may, I think you will all agree, be considered to have passed this elementary stage when they can already read and write with tolerable fluency, are familiar more or less with the elements of numeration, and can clothe common ideas in more or less intelligible English.

It is at this point that I would begin the study of *one* of these two ancient languages—the point at which our boys, without necessarily leaving home, are as a rule passed on for purposes of education to the teachers of the sterner sex. And here let me say that in this paper that part of education is especially considered which may be summed up in that most comprehensive and elastic of words, “lessons.” “Lessons,” I will define as, “regular instruction consciously given and received on special subjects.”

There are at the present time some earnest men and women who seem to believe that for children there should be no lessons consciously given or imbibed: that all a child's learning should be done unconsciously. This is true, no doubt, up to a certain point. But however variable that point may be, I think that all of you, who are here this evening, will agree that for children who have reached the age of eight years-or thereabouts—it is essential that there should be a certain definite period of time daily set aside for definite instruction, mental and moral, given by some competent teacher—the child's own parent or another. That the child itself should be conscious now that it is being taught may perhaps be unessential; though, personally, I believe that it is well for a child, even before this point, to learn that it ought sometimes to keep still and quiet, even though it may not feel tired, to grasp the fact that it is under a moral obligation to cultivate its intelligence, and to realize that life is not and never will be all play.

Reading, writing and the elements of numeration can all be picked up easily as games, or at any rate without definite periods of teaching or conscious effort on the child's part—provided, always, that you begin young enough.

Your child's moral education will begin-if you are wise, in the quite early months of its little life-before even it can walk or speak.

Physical education, if only you allow it proper food and clothing, plenty of fresh air, and free liberty (within reasonable limits) to soil its clothes, its fingers and its face to its own heart's content-physical education will for many years take care of itself.

But at eight years old, or thereabouts, for the age is variable by at least a year on either side, there comes a time when mental education should begin in earnest, and it is at this point that I would begin to base mental and to a large extent moral education on a study of one of the old languages.

But let us go back a little and begin at the beginning. What do we mean by education? We mean the drawing out of a child's faculties; the leading him up to something higher than he is likely to reach, if left to the unaided care of Nature. And what is the end or aim of it all? What do we desire to gain for our children by education? If we were to put this question to all our friends, and were able in every case to elicit an answer, I expect that the answers would be very various. Among the most common would probably be some to this effect: "Because we wish them to get on in life"-or "Because we wish them to be gentlemen"- while some few would say: "Because everybody does: and so we must don't you know!" And none of these answers would be altogether wrong, only somewhat incomplete. Some of you perhaps, and I myself, would say: "Because we wish them to be happy." For in answer to the old question: "What is the highest good?" which I assume to be the aim of all of us in education, I know no better answer than that of the old Greek philosopher who said: "Happiness!"-"Happiness!" a beautiful word that I will not spoil by attempting to define, except to say that I do not use it as synonymous with "pleasure," although happiness almost of necessity includes *some* pleasures of the higher kinds;- the word ought to satisfy everyone of any and every shade of opinion, religious or political. But though we may not be able to define happiness for one another, hardly perhaps for ourselves, whether we regard it with the old Greek as "a quiet form of *mental activity*, presupposing a sufficiency of this world's goods, and unaccompanied by pain,"-or whether we think with Tolstoy that "in the simple service of his fellow-men lies a man's only lasting happiness,"-or whether, not looking for it here, we wait for it hereafter, as "the meed* of saints, the white robe, and the palm," we all know, I think, the surest way of getting near our goal.

*meed=a deserved share or reward

In our present work-a-day world we must not aim at happiness directly, or we shall surely miss it altogether, but we must be content to gather it by the way, as we *work* hard and honestly, doing with all our might whatever our hands or hearts may find to do. And that our children may be enabled to act thus, *we wish to develop to the uttermost all the faculties of mind and body which actually or potentially possess.*

The faculties which I should most wish to develop in my children are:

- I. The power to discern between right and wrong.
- II. Strength to choose the right.
- III. Sympathy with all living things-especially with their own kind-with their countrymen.
- IV. The faculty of observation.
- V. The art of reasoning correctly.
- VI. Ability to express their thoughts in clear intelligible language.

Let us consider some of these more minutely, beginning with the last. To express our thoughts clearly and intelligibly, and still more to reason correctly, we must have a sound working knowledge of our language; and there is no way of getting a thorough mastery over one's own language like the analytical study of another. And best of all is the analytical study of Latin and Greek. I do wish to disparage my own language: I am very fond of it. From the lips of Shakespeare, Milton, Tennyson, Ruskin and Dean Stanley, it is as forcible and musical as could be desired.

But in the mouths of most men it seems to me that English is to Greek or Latin as a rough lump of conglomerate to a piece of polished marble. Greek and Latin are the most perfect and highly finished languages that we know-(I must confess to knowing nothing of Sanskrit; perhaps that is as good). They are better vehicles of instruction from the very fact that they are dead and stereotyped-no longer spoken- though in measure they still live and speak. They do not shift and change as do modern languages from one generation to another: all is firm ground and certainty-certainty! so comforting to a beginner-to us all.

The case endings of the nouns, adjectives and pronouns: the personal endings of the verbs; the various terminations of tense, mood and voice-and in Greek especially-the rich abundance of particles, limiting and graduating shades of meaning to an extraordinary extent, all give almost endless scope to learners for developing and exercising their powers of observation. And from this same variety of flexional

endings the study of Greek and Latin is the best medium. I know for combatting that most deadly of all faults in would-be learners, that is, I believe, responsible for more than half the ignorance we some of us deplore in our sons, who should be by this time, at least, partly educated. I mean the almost universal habit of indistinct articulation. That a lamentably large number of our young and middle-aged men, notwithstanding the fact that they were taught Latin in their youth, still manifest this fault in their maturity, is not a proof that classics are no cure for this defect, though it may be an indication that these inarticulate people were taught imperfectly. From recollections of my boyhood I feel sure that the men of our father's, or our grandfather's age, who knew their Horace off by heart and quoted him in season and out of season, were not only more terse and pointed in their epigrams and anecdotes, but habitually more clear and precise in their everyday pronunciation than the majority of our contemporaries, whose education has been more varied but less classical. To quote Canon Lyttelton, from Mr. Barnett's new book on *Teaching and Organisation*: "An inflected language gives exercise to the pronunciation of the last syllable of a word; just where an uninflected language breaks down as an instrument for the purpose of articulation; especially if, as in English, the tendency is more and more to throw the accent back."

While the order of thought is much the same in Latin as in English, the syntactical arrangement of words and phrases is so entirely different that, though a boy of fair ability may learn to translate a passage of Latin into English without being very highly educated, no one can learn to render English into passable Latin without being taught-as he advances from simple phrases to long and complex sentences-to think correctly and to reason. This is why Latin prose composition deservedly holds a high place in our public schools' examinations. It is a better test of intelligence and of sound mental training than anything else. No boy can write it who has not learnt to think and reason. The same may be said, to some extent, of Latin verse composition: but this is more imitative (though not by any means all imitation) and more tricky.

I am quite sure that nothing makes one understand a piece of English, whether prose or verse, like having to turn it into another language, and especially into a formal language, such as Latin. The exact meaning of all the words and phrases must stand out clearly in your mind and quite distinctly before you can turn them: words and phrases that perhaps your tongue has uttered glibly dozens of times before without realizing their depth-the ideas of the writer, the sequence of his thoughts, his intention

must be grasped-his very mood or mental attitude, if you are bent on producing a perfect piece of Latin prose that shall be a complete representation of the original. And after all, some anti-classicist may say, when all is done you have at best a poor attempt at imitation of the inimitable Cicero. Even if this be granted-and I do *not* grant it-you have had, at any rate, a grand and pleasurable mental exercise and you now understand that particular passage of your English author in a way that you never understood him before. And for one who never gets as far as advanced Latin prose composition, what a grasp of new ideas is given by ordinary translation from the old dead language into his own!

Listen for a moment to that great schoolmaster, Dr. Arnold, of Rugby, quoted by Sir Joshua Fitch, in *Teaching and Organisation*. "My delight," he writes, "in going over Homer and Virgil with the boys makes me think what a treat it must be to teach Shakespeare to a good class of young Greeks in regenerate Athens, to dwell upon him line by line, and word by word in a way that nothing but a translation lesson ever will enable one to do, and so to get all his pictures and thoughts leisurely into one's mind, till I verily think one would, after a time, almost give out light in the dark, after having been steeped, as it were, in such an atmosphere of brilliance. And how could this ever be done without having the power of construing, as the proper medium through which alone all the beauty can be transmitted? *because else we travel too fast, or more than half of it escapes us.*"

And if I shall not weary you by quotations, I should like to read you a paraphrase of Roger Ascham's (in his *Schoolmaster*) from the younger Pliny. Speaking of the profit to be gained by translating from Greek into Latin and back again from Latin into Greek, he says, "In marking daily and following thus the steps of the best authors, like invention of arguments, like order in disposition, like utterance in elocution, is easily gathered up, whereby your scholar shall be brought not only to like eloquence but also to all true understanding and right judgment, both for writing and speaking."

But, I have heard it said, the powers of *observation* are surely best cultivated in the garden or the fields by observing Nature in all her wonderful and variegated forms: plants with their hidden organs slowly yet surely developing into perfect shapes; stones with their fossils and the tales they tell; the stars that course through heaven innumerable, each in his appointed track; the animal world in all its marvelous variety?

All these I grant are fairer fields on which to exercise the faculty of observation; but I would not make them the basis of instruction. No child whose bent towards natural science is so determined that he may wish hereafter to take up botany, astronomy or zoology as his work in life, will be deterred from doing this by the fact that he was first taught consciously to exercise his powers of observation on grammatical minutiae. I would make these sciences-one or more of them-a recreation. I would have all children taught to regard one and all of them as some of the grandest forms of recreation, or, if you will, as modes of happiness to be gathered by the way. But for the basis of education I would have something less fascinating to the outward vision.

Yet here, I fear, I *know*, I am in danger of being misunderstood. I, even I, who speak to you tonight, have been upbraided personally, upbraided fiercely by new educationists as though I in common with other teachers of the classics took a fiendish pleasure in torturing little boys, -grinding them at grammar until they groaned, and grinding them still more because they groaned: from an ascetic misconception that misery is the meed of mortal men, and in particular of children. For opponents of the classics as a basis of education have one very favorite expression which is invariably fired off while picturing the misery of small boys learning Latin; it is the compound word "Gerund-grinding." Enunciated with the proper kind and degree of emphasis I have noticed that this apparently harmless phrase is rhetorically always *most* effective in rousing enthusiasm against teachers of Latin. As part of the armor of one who would argue seriously, it is about as valuable as the cant phrases "pig-headed tory," "low-born radical," which are no doubt very deadly weapons, of a kind, in quite uncivilized warfare.

But that I, or anyone, should take pleasure in infant torture, for torture's sake, is a misconception that I confess has hurt my feelings very much. We do not teach boys grammar because it makes them groan. Indeed, we try our very hardest to make our grammar lessons pleasurable. And I think that some of us sometimes at least succeed. But we do not disguise from ourselves or from the children the fact that grammar is not always to all of us, and cannot be, the *most* delightful and interesting of all studies. But we teach it to them because we believe that a sound knowledge of grammar is absolutely essential for the *thorough* grasp of any language (notwithstanding the surprising fact that has lately been brought home to us in traveling through France with ladies, that a *fluency* in conversation, vying with the native Gallic glibness, is quite compatible with compete ignorance of subjective modes and genders). And it has

been found by almost universal experience that grammar is very readily learnt by children-if properly presented to them: learnt practically with no real groaning at all; while to an adult learning a new language it most irksome; so much so that he often fails to get any real grasp of it at all. Undeniably, *some* children do groan at grammar: and I believe that there are some adults who groan and grumble at any and everything. But we do-I confess it without shame or fear of consequences-we do teach children grammar all the same, believing it well for them to know grammar, and simply *not* refraining because at first they may perhaps not like it. For we believe that life will flow always smoothly, always easily, with no rocks ahead or shoals, for very few: and we believe that children can and ought to be taught young to prepare for rocks and shoals. It is *not* good for them always to be allowed to do only what they fancy, to leave undone always what may be at first distasteful. It is wiser and kinder to subject them early to a discipline which can and must at times be stern without being cruel: to teach them that *all* duties are not actually pleasurable in the doing, but that nevertheless they must be sometimes bravely done, and that happiness, which is higher than pleasure, will follow in the wake of work accomplished.

The most difficult boy to deal with in a school is the boy who sets his face against some particular branch of study "because he does not like it." And the parent says with surprise, when the schoolmaster appeals for some parental help, "Of course he cannot learn it! he does not like it! I never liked it! my father never liked it!" But presently the boy finds out that from lack of knowledge in this subject he is likely to be cut out from the career on which he has set his heart-and then perhaps it is too late for repentance-though he seek it bitterly.

So much for grammar as a training ground for the power of observation.

(To be continued.)

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