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“WHAT I OWE TO THE CLASSICS” —A REPLY

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WHEN I read in the August number of the *Parents' Review* the report of Mrs. Mary Hamilton's delightful address, I regretted more than ever that an official engagement had made it impossible for me to be present. The subject is one that always attracts me. I still read and enjoy the Classics—or parts of them: but still more do I read translations of them, and everything that I can put my hands to about the poets, historians and philosophers, and the great periods in which they lived, from Bérard, Murray and Zimmern, down through the centuries to Dill and Haverfield.

I approach the subject therefore with sympathy, and it is an article of my faith that there can be no true understanding of European history, no true appreciation of the history and literature of our own country, unless some study of the life and thought of Greece and Rome, and of their great achievements in all the spheres of human interest, is included in the school curriculum, though the ancient languages themselves may find no place. But Mrs. Hamilton goes very much further. She would “like compulsory Greek retained, at any rate at Oxford and Cambridge,” and by inference she stands committed to all that such retention would involve at our public and preparatory schools, and to all that it would involve at the public secondary schools where Greek is seldom taught now, but where it would have to be taught if their pupils, who

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now have access to Oxford and Cambridge, are to retain that privilege.

I would not say that the humanities receive the treatment that they should receive at the majority of the public secondary schools, or at the hands of the examining bodies who largely determine their curricula, and, alas, by consequence their teaching methods; but I do say that it would be a public disaster if the pupils of those schools were to be excluded from Oxford and Cambridge because they have no Greek; and a disaster to education if the schools should be constrained to attempt to provide it.

Mrs. Hamilton's end is the achievement of a disciplined mind; and with that end in view she says, “it is good for one when young to be compelled to study with rigorous exactitude, quite against one's own then inclination, some definite subject, in which perhaps one does not at the time feel any particular interest. If the subject can be such as does possess intrinsic interest, as, of course, either classics or mathematics, or indeed any other subject properly taught, does, and classics and mathematics possess in supreme degree, so much the better.” And to the discipline, the unwelcome discipline, to which her philosopher-father subjected her, not until the age, be it remarked, of seventeen; to the Greek prose she detested and the Latin grammar that was repugnant, to classics in the perfectly strict Oxford and Cambridge sense, she would ascribe the training of her judgment and her taste, of her powers of thought and expression, the achievement, so far as her modesty will allow her to admit it, of a disciplined mind.

But Mrs. Hamilton approaches the subject with such a charming modesty that she would make us forget, if she could, that she is no normal product of her system. She is one of

the giants; and only the giants thrive under it. They are the fittest, and survive in a pitiless school of natural selection. But how many fall out by the way, their minds undisciplined, their intellects untrained, their tastes unformed, or formed awry—the philistines and young barbarians, who form so considerable a percentage of the product of our public schools, and of whom it is not expected that they should like anything that they do in the classroom, but for whom it is claimed that they receive an incomparable training in character; as though character and intellect could be so easily divorced, or character receive its true development at such a cost!

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I will not question the appropriateness of the method for the giants, for those who have the good fortune to embark upon their education with a philosopher-father beside them to supply the opening mind with its appropriate food, and endowed with an intellectual equipment—hereditary, like speed in a horse—enormously superior (though Mrs. Hamilton will not admit it) to that with which most of us set out. But for the rest of us—though drudgery there must be, and the slow observation and collection of material that did not seem relevant, before judgments can be formed—unless the formation of sound judgments is to be the exclusive prerogative of a still smaller percentage than can be trusted to form them now, some other way must be found than the “classics’ in the perfectly strict Oxford and Cambridge sense,” or alternatively mathematics. True, Mrs. Hamilton does point another way: “any other subject properly taught” may possess the intrinsic interest that will reward “study with rigorous exactitude quite against one’s own then inclination.” But—she would have compulsory Greek at Oxford and Cambridge, and what chance will those other subjects then have at the schools?

Let me try to put the case of a boy who had no philosopher-father, and who embarked upon his education not as a giant with a first class mind, but in the humbler company of the second class. If late and halting he has attained to some power of expression and ordered thinking, it is by virtue of a discipline imposed (so he believes) not by classical study, not by school or university, but by some training in law, by teaching history to scholarship candidates, by administrative experience, and by a long and patient practice in writing the mother tongue. Wordsworth indeed asks:—

Who knows the individual hour in which
His habits were first sown, even as a seed?
Who that shall point as with a wand and say
This portion of the river of my mind
Came from yon fountain?

But one can unfortunately point to hours, and, alas, to years when almost no fruitful seed was sown, and when no fountain fed the river of the mind.

This boy then of whom I speak, and whom at long length I have come to know pretty well, was bred in the country. His mother died before his second year had passed. His father was no philosopher. Indeed if Mr. Shandy had protested to him

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“But you have some ideas of what you talk about?”; he must have replied with my Uncle Toby, “No more than my horse.” It is doubtful whether the boy ever saw him read a book. *The Times*,

The Field, and a financial paper or two, formed the staple of his reading. He had some interest in accountancy, as became an ex-auditor of the old Local Government Board; for the rest circumstances had compelled him to farm (unsuccessfully), and his days had become a round of farming and estate management. His conversation was limited by that round, by politics, and by the other common topics suggested by his restricted range of reading. He cared nothing for society, and the boys (there was a younger brother) might almost as well have lived upon a desert island, until they went away at the age of nine or ten to a local grammar school of declining reputation, whence at fourteen they migrated in turn to a famous public school. Their earlier education had been managed by an old housekeeper of severely evangelical convictions, who took them to the little village church two miles away every Sunday morning, and who was much put about when the aged incumbent discarded the black gown of Geneva for a white surplice. She taught them reading, writing and arithmetic, the Bible, the elements of English history according to Mrs. Markham, and the piano; but poetry they never heard of; nature was a sealed book; and the children's books of the period they never saw.

It may be said that these conditions were not normal, that indeed they were as exceptional at one end of the scale as Mrs. Hamilton's at the other. No doubt the boy's isolation from the society of children and from the child's natural life was exceptional, and has handicapped him all his days; but of the boys who go to public schools, and still more to the public secondary schools, probably a majority, even a large majority, have no more foundation in culture or sound learning. Certainly they have no philosopher-fathers.

Subject such boys, as this boy was subjected, not at the age of seventeen but at ten, to the discipline of classics in the perfectly strict Oxford and Cambridge sense—"a rather treadmill form of preparation"—and what will be the result? Will they achieve disciplined minds? Not so. They will have got the grammar and syntax of Latin and Greek by heart; they will have laboured along the arduous way to the composition of prose and verse; they will have translated the [p 635]

historians and the poets; but it will be as though they had walked along some cruel track sown deliberately with dangerous obstacles, discouraged, weary and in pain, through the fairest scenery in the world, with their eyes directed always downwards towards the terrors of the formidable path, all the incomparable beauties of which Mrs. Hamilton speaks entirely unseen by them. Mrs. Hamilton herself could walk confidently with head erect and seeing eyes. She did not adventure on that journey till she was seventeen, when the path was easier and she could find her way; the philosopher-father had prepared her for it, and she had a mind of first-rate ability. But even minds of first-rate ability will have small pleasure or profit if formal education is discontinued at the age of eighteen. What does even a Macaulay say? "A young man, whatever his genius may be, is no judge of such a writer as Thucydides"; and he adds, "I could not bear Euripides at College." What then is a boy of fifteen or sixteen likely to make of either at school? It [sic] it be so, what hope is there that any but the first-rate mind can profit by the severity of the discipline? For those who cannot keep the pace or stay the distance, it kills desire to work, and prevents them from doing what they had power to do, and might—indeed would—have done if they had not been forced to keep company with others immeasurably their superiors in intellectual power.

It is with the mind as with the body. Who would go through an athlete's training; who would run, or play tennis or cricket; who would row or swim, if he must always do it from the

beginning, not only in the company but in competition with “Blues” and champions who made his every movement seem ridiculous? The average man under such conditions would simply give up playing games. But let him follow a course suitable to his capacity, and not in competition—no marks, no praise, no blame—and he will rejoice to exercise his body. So too, given the opportunity, he will rejoice to exercise his mind, to explore all fields of human knowledge. For he has the desire to know; indeed his trouble is that what he wants to know is not taught in school. But his own language will be the key that unlocks the treasury; if the key is to be Greek he will remain outside, for both language and subject matter repel him, and the modern knowledge which he wants is not to be found in Greek at all.

Unless interest has been touched the disciplined mind will

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not be achieved, and in our schools of every type interest is too seldom touched. Certainly in most boys the classics do not awaken it. They do not expect interest in school, and they do not find it. Even Mrs. Hamilton confesses to repugnance to the study of Latin grammar and detestation for Greek prose, and she had not spent disastrous years of girlhood under the same sterile régime. There had been from earliest days the philosopher-father and the background of culture, and before she was sent to the treadmill she was already interested in philosophy; she was seventeen, and she knew why she was sent to it. Interest had been stirred—interest in philosophy!—and she was sent of set purpose to forge an instrument for the further pursuit of the subject that had stirred it. At seventeen you do know what you are doing. You go to the workshop to discipline a mind already well-stored, interested, alert; a mind, it may be, that has already shown its superiority to other minds, many of which, discouraged by conditions too severe and by a competition to which they are unequal, have given up the struggle and have sunk into a torpor out of which they are awakened only occasionally by the application of a goad. But there need have been neither discouragement nor torpor nor goad, for if interest is stirred—and those in whom it cannot be stirred are few indeed—the classroom is liked, not hated, as hated it still is by so many boys in so many schools; and it was hated still more when alternatives to the classics were fewer, and methods still more austere, when the splendid lines of *Paradise Lost* were written daily in sections of twenty-five for common punishments, and English poetry was never seen except for the detested purpose of rendering it into Greek or Latin.

The boy of whom I have written went up to Oxford with a classical scholarship, for though his Latin and Greek prose was wholly undistinguished, and his masters had abandoned all hope of getting even passable verse out of him, and had at last emancipated him from the drudgery (the metres he had mastered; industry and an ear for rhythm had achieved that; it was insight and imagination that at that stage were wanting in his unstored undeveloped mind) he translated fluently and well. Honour Moderations resulted in a meritorious second class, that just failed of being a first—the appropriate reward of industry: but when the exacting school of Literæ Humaniores was entered, again the task was beyond the mind’s

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equipment. He did not “vanquish Berkeley with a grin”; he had not the assurance for that; but he could not understand why Berkeley thought it necessary to dance—so it seemed—like a will-o’-the-wisp through trackless quicksands of his own invention. Metaphysics at that stage was still beyond the boy, and Aristotle with his difficult technical language, so beautifully and

ingeniously devised for the expression of abstractions which, and the purpose of which, were not much better understood than Berkeley's, finished the rout of a mind that was not equipped for such studies. Health suffered, and after a year, with intense relief, the boy was released to study Modern History. At last, but not too late to achieve distinction, he had found a subject (it was virgin soil) that he followed with delight some four or five years later—a subject which for the first time among the subjects of orthodox and organised study set him thinking. Immediately after Oxford came the study of law and a new appreciation of what evidence means.

Was the severe discipline of the Classics the right course for this boy? Beyond doubt it was not. And still less is it the right course for boys less able, and much less ambitious and industrious, who drop the ancient languages with a sigh of relief on leaving school at eighteen, and never touch them again. They have not achieved disciplined minds. Latin and Greek grammar, the mastery of syntax, the effort of exact translation, have not taught them to think (they have remained in a separate compartment of the mind), still less have they taught them to think with precision, to weigh evidence, to judge fairly, to refrain from forming judgments when they lack the material necessary for their formation. They do not "know themselves." They have not thought enough, have not gone deeply enough into any subject, to be able even to say, "I do not know."

And the scholar, when he has achieved the disciplined mind, too often leaves behind him his instruments of precision when he passes from the study of his special subject, passes from the world of books and abstractions in which the scholar lives, into the work-a-day world of his fellow men. Has he been so successful there? Does he always collect the relevant material before he forms a judgment? Is he fair? Does he rid himself of prejudice and preconception? Do we not all know conspicuous examples to the contrary within our own personal experience? And what of the adventures of the scholar with

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his trained mind in religion, politics, economics, administration? Too often he is one-sided, the specialist's doom. Great minds must touch life at more points than he.

Should not education begin by waking interest in, and training the mind in the habit of concentration upon, the sources of knowledge which will be found in well written English books? Ought not the boy of whom I have written to have found in the classroom access to English and European history, as well as to that of fifth century Greece and pre-Empire Rome, divorced as they then were from all organic connection with the story of modern Europe, and of the millennia that had gone before? Should it not have been the business of those who taught him, should it not be the business of all who teach to-day, to establish contact with the English poets and the masters of English prose, with the literature and history of France or Germany and with their spoken tongues—a fine antidote to insularity—with the drama, with art and music and their history, with the study of the stars, the rocks, the flowers, the birds? Might a boy not learn to love Shakespeare instead of being examined about him in his earlier years (and hating him by consequence), and poetry without paraphrasing or being asked to see in it all the adult sees? Once interested there is more than a chance that the boy or girl will issue from the severer studies with a disciplined mind. If the school subjects, and the methods of handling them, not only fail to interest but actively repel (that is a consequence of the pursuit of examination results), the chance is small. The school of life may do it for a few. But

interest must come first; then will follow comparison, the sifting of material, long patient practice, the method of trial and failure, and finally capacity for judgment.

For the mass of mankind I am convinced that the path to the formation of careful judgments is not that of the Classics. I put my faith in the methods of Charlotte Mason and the P.N.E.U.; in the schools to which marks and punishments and competitive methods are foreign; where teachers do not dominate, where the personality of the child is respected, where each gets what is appropriate to him, and where by natural consequence he loves his work. I have no faith in the schools where work is either boring or distasteful, and neither excites pleasure in the classroom nor leaves any pleasant memory of it.