

English.

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ON THE STUDY OF ENGLISH.

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A discussion of profound interest to all those engaged in teaching was that between Matthew Arnold and Professor Huxley. The latter, speaking at the Mason College, Birmingham, Eng., found himself "wholly unable to admit that either nations or individuals will really advance if their outfit draws nothing from the stores of physical science." Matthew Arnold had previously declared the proper outfit of the members of the civilized world to be "a knowledge of Greek, Roman, and Eastern antiquity, and of one another." Educationists seem to be now very strongly in favor of emphasizing the judgment of Professor Huxley. Those who, without combating his opinion, do not forget the claims of literature usually rest upon the conclusion of Matthew Arnold. Plainly speaking, though, of course, with a very wide margin for exceptions, those in favor of a scientific training are not in favor of a thoroughgoing study of Greek, Roman, and Eastern antiquity, while those who have given adequate attention to the ancients (in the accepted sense of the term) have only vague notions of the value of scientific training, and think, without a doubt, that undue prominence is apt to be given to that training.

Matthew Arnold really includes in his comprehensive outfit "the best which has been thought and said by modern nations," but the majority of debaters, and among them an eminent Canadian, dwell mainly upon Latin and Greek literature on the one side, and upon natural knowledge on the other. They either forget, or do not think it necessary, to dwell upon the study of *English* language and literature. The result of this tendency is very apparent. Men and women with a right appreciation of even the greatest masters of English are few; men and women with any knowledge of the development of our language, still fewer; while scarcely any think it worth while to cultivate the ability to read First English or Anglo-Saxon. The students of the history of the English people are, of course, more numerous, though no one will pretend to say that the study, even of history, is adequate.

Among school boys this "neglect of their own" is conspicuous. Many a boy has read three or four books of Homer and Virgil, who has not read a single act of a play of Shakespeare, and to whom Addison, Goldsmith, and even Emerson and Thackeray are but names, to say nothing of Caedmon, or the author of the *Beowulf*. Many a boy can "scan" Virgil who does not know what "blank verse" is; many who have made a careful study of the catalogue of ships in the "Iliad" know nothing of the growth of that spirit which animated Sir Richard Grenville when he kept at bay the ships of Spain.

Among adults we find the editor of a well-known magazine asking for a sonnet of not more than twenty-five or thirty lines; an American journalist stating that the death of Becket added something to the effect of Magna Charta; a public orator who speaks of the author of *Don Quixote* and John Bunyan as two English writers who wrote their masterpieces in prison. The editor had probably "composed" ("placed together") Latin elegiacs in his youth; the journalist probably knew that Julius Cæsar was not a Greek; and the public speaker had been to a great school.

It is an easy, but not a profitable, task to multiply instances to show that very often much more is known of the Greek and Roman languages, literatures, and histories than is known of the English language, literature, and history. Herbert Spencer attempts to give a reason for this: "Men dress their children's minds as they do their bodies, in the prevailing fashion. As the Orinoco Indian puts on paint before leaving his hut, not with a view to any direct benefit, but because he would be ashamed to be seen without it; so a boy's drilling in Latin and Greek is insisted on, not because of their intrinsic value, but that he may not be disgraced by being found

ignorant of them—that he may have 'the education of a gentleman'—the badge marking a certain social position, and bringing a consequent respect." This reason, no doubt, is partly true, but, I beg to think, only *partly* true. What is of value is, not so much the ultimate knowledge of Latin and Greek, as the boy's *drilling* in Latin and Greek. I do not here seek to disparage the value of that drilling, but I contend that the drilling in English is just as valuable, and the knowledge obtained of very great value also.

The very great majority of pupils or students who do not become professional men after their studies are over never again pay any attention to Latin and Greek literature, except, perhaps, in translations. Some may, perhaps, remember, very occasionally, a Latin or Greek word that enables them to see the exact meaning of an English word, but that is the limit of the application of their knowledge. Some of the students become clergymen. Among these, I think it is scarcely possible to exaggerate the need there is of a knowledge of, and sympathy with, great Englishmen and the works of great Englishmen. The nerveless sermons, the discourses on minute points of doctrine, the successions of platitudes, are scarcely uttered by men who have studied their instrument of expression with a loving and devoted study, or have made themselves conversant with the true philosophy of history, and more particularly with the great causes that have had as effect the development of our race. I speak of the clergy specially, because I feel that to them a knowledge of the English language, literature, and history is a second essential.

As boys at school and students at college cannot learn everything, the question is one of comparative desirableness. If teachers could be found enthusiastic, capable, patient, and patriotic enough to make a pupil's drilling in English as thorough as his drilling in Greek, the issue lies in the comparative value of the knowledge acquired. And here I think no one would be found to deny that, considering an average case and all the circumstances of a pupil's life after he ceases to do nothing but study, the knowledge of English would be relatively of much greater value than the knowledge of Greek. When we think that what is best in Greek may be learned through translations, our conviction is strengthened. I knew a manufacturer who was more conversant with Greek and Roman ideas and Greek and Roman manners than many, nay, I will say, the majority of, graduates in classical honors, and he could not read a Latin sentence, and was ignorant of the Greek alphabet. He was led to make this close inquiry through the study of English literature.

Is it not the prerogative of every English-speaking boy or girl to know the best that has been said and sung in English? Is there no obligation upon those who train English-speaking boys and girls to give them some knowledge of the growth and development of the language they speak? It was a good retort of the man who was asked if he had read Shakespeare, "Am I English?" but the same retort would be, unfortunately, meaningless and unconvincing if uttered by a vast number of those who learned that tongue from their mother's lips.

But a stronger inducement with many to the study of Latin and Greek is that hinted at by Herbert Spencer—the knowledge of these languages forms part of the "education of a gentleman." This is the result of a narrow view of men and women. What we want is sympathy with the thought, perennial, immortal. It is no matter that we can read with ease, or imitate the form, if we are without this sympathy. The boy or man with "original energy" will not be long in making himself familiar with the ideas of Plato and Virgil, even though their language is "dead" to him; he will be sitting in their company as an understanding equal, and the unsympathetic scholar be doing his translation outside. While the others are toiling to hammer out the meaning of a passage in the "Phædo," one will have read and re-read the whole book in its Englished form, and will be ready to read it again at a later day with a greater intellectual delight. The work will yield at last to the "hammerers," and maybe one or two of them will be able to rid themselves of the clang and bang and attend to the philosophy, but the recollection of that smithy work debars the majority from any after-attempt. They think of the reading of the

Phædo as a task they hope to be excused from having to perform again.

Of course, I am not here denying the value of the exercise as an exercise. I am thinking merely of the value of the knowledge acquired as part of the "education of a gentleman." Let us leave this cant of accomplishment, and acknowledge the decisive demarcation of the soul. "In my dealing with my child, my Latin and my Greek, my accomplishments and my money, stead me nothing; but as much soul as I have avails. If I am wilful, he sets his will against mine, one for one, and leaves me, if I please, the degradation of beating him by my superiority of strength. But if I renounce my will, and act for the soul, setting that up as umpire between us two, out of his young eyes look the same soul; he reveres and loves with me." Let me add to this a sentiment of Ruskin, "The man who likes what you like belongs to the same class with you, I think." We may well leave out of our consideration this question of Latin and Greek as the attributes of a gentleman.

I wish to be considered, then, not as a literary vandal, but as a patriotic advocate, when I say that the study of every other language should be subordinated to the study of our own.

PRAYER.

M. A. WATT.

James Montgomery was born in Ayrshire in 1771, and died 1854. He was contemporary with Scott, Byron, Gibbon, Burns, Crabbe, Moore, Mrs. Hemans, Campbell, Heber, Shelley, Kirke White, and many other writers whose names are familiarly known.

This poem is of a kind which children easily learn parrot-fashion, but which remains perfectly unknown in its meaning. I have never been satisfied with my teaching of it, and determined to do something this time to get the idea into the minds of my pupils before they caught the swing of the rhythm and words. It is not a usual thing to dissect and paraphrase poetry in my class, but we began to do it in this instance before reading even the first stanza. Taking the first line, "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire," the question was asked as to which words they did not understand. "Sincere" and "desire" were the ones. Suggestions were made as to synonymous words by the pupils, then the derivation of "sincere" from "sine" and "cere," "without wax"; so the idea of purity and freedom from adulteration was seen in our word.

The line was then written on each slate: "Prayer is the honest longing of the soul." The second line, "Uttered or unexpressed," was examined, and synonyms given. The whole then read:

"Prayer is the honest longing of the soul, whether it is spoken or not spoken."

Illustration of idea: A child, hungry, looks at its mother, who understands its want, even though no word passes its lips.

"As the hart panteth after the water-brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God."

The third and fourth lines:

"The motion of a hidden fire

That trembles in the breast"

contain no strange words, but the idea is absolutely ungrasped. The paraphrasing will give something like this:

"The movement or stirring of an unseen flame or feeling which moves in the heart of all men."

What feeling is it that all men, whether civilized or pagan, have? The feeling of needing, of wanting, of longing for comfort, for protection, for help, and also a feeling of worship. Only one tribe has ever been found that did not worship. This feeling rises in the breast towards God, like the fire rising towards the sun, like the flame on Jewish altars rising to heaven. The feeling is compared to a flame. Why?

Individual taste was exercised in the selection of synonyms and different readings were given by the proud authors.

This was one:

"Prayer is the pure wish of the heart,
Spoken or not said;

It is the moving of an unseen flame

That trembles in the breast of all human beings."

Rather slow seemed our progress, but the second stanza received prompt attention, and some