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Parnassus in Collegio

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*"Being ambitious to commence author,
I was composing a new horn-book."*

ANON. (1763)

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WHEN Stephen Leacock, in that sparkling essay on *Homer and Humbug*, confessed a secret desire to write on a stone: "The classics are only primitive literature. They belong to the same class as primitive machinery and primitive music and primitive medicine"—and then throw the stone through the windows of a university "and hide behind the fence to see the professors buzz," he revealed an inclination which the majority of college students—and others—applaud. Their approbation, once secret and restrained, is no longer modest. Of course one never quite knows when Professor Leacock is jesting and when he is serious. He is often both at the same time. But it makes little difference. Whether or not he meant what he said in that particular essay, his implications speak, it seems to me, the convictions of most undergraduates, as well as of many "educators".

In recent years we have heard much about a reaction against the classics. We have been told that the study of Greek and Latin is definitely on the wane, and, further, that this is altogether fitting and proper. Yet we have heard the same things before. The humanities have been attacked again and again, but they have somehow managed to survive pretty well. They are surprisingly vital. Jowett

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nearly sixty years ago expressed hope that Greek could be saved at Oxford and Cambridge. And it was saved, you recall. The action of Yale several years ago in modifying some of the compulsory classics requirements for graduation was both highly praised and roundly condemned. It was interpreted as a sign that the classics, previously defeated in secondary schools, could no longer hold their place in higher education. One who would defend the classics cannot deny that they are pursued less now than they were formerly. But the number who do study them—still large—are doing so for definite purposes and not because they cannot escape them. That is the point. Because required Greek or Latin is removed it does not mean that the classics are deserted. And the reason is that there are in them those things which no serious student of literature—literature in the widest sense of the word, the “amassed thought and experience of innumerable minds”—can afford to neglect.

In England education for nearly three centuries was based on Greek and Latin. Schoolboys,

“Lash'd into Latin by the tingling rod,”

spent most of their time composing Latin verses and studying classical syntax. Until 1851 the instruction at Eton was wholly classical. At the other great public schools this was true until well into the century. Shrewsbury produced some of the foremost classical scholars of the day; B. H. Kennedy, Robert Scott, H. A. J. Munro, Evans (long headmaster of Rugby) are only a few of the Salopians who were distinguished classicists. Rugby was exclusively classical until Dr. Thomas Arnold became headmaster in 1828. When he was a candidate for the post it was predicted that, if chosen, he would “change the face of education all through the public schools of England.” He did just that. He balanced the too heavily classical curriculum by adding mathematics, history, and modern languages. He be-

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lieved, however, and practiced his belief, that the classics should form the basis of all teaching.

Dr. Arnold thus corrected the fault of overdoing the classics. Before his day the classics were looked upon, as J. W. Mackail notes, as "objects of study and means of education possessed of some mystical or sacramental value." They were revered. One is reminded of Cardinal Bembo's refusal to read his Bible on the ground that it might corrupt his pure Ciceronian style. The new master of Rugby was convinced that the classics, though by no means the only substance of culture, should have a commanding and recognized position in the curriculum. English schools generally have followed his example.

American schools and colleges were never so preponderately absorbed by the classics, and certainly are not today. The high schools have gradually but resolutely eliminated Greek while retaining Latin—a step rather damaging to the welfare of Latin, Greek being copulative with it. The result is that colleges must teach the elementary Greek which should have been acquired, and formerly was, in high schools and preparatory schools.

Accordingly, since it cannot be disputed that the humanistic subjects are pursued by fewer persons—whether because there are so many other things to study now or because of the anti-traditionalist spirit of the day—what is their present position? Or, rather, what is their position likely to be in the future? The answer lies in a simple statement of fact, namely, that as long as European literature is studied, the classics must be studied. F. W. H. Myers in one of his essays remarks the fact that in the curriculum of today there are so many new subjects (due to our vastly increased scientific knowledge) that we neither expect nor desire the wide study of the classics universal a century ago. But one group of persons will continue to con the classics, the group of those who apply themselves seriously to the study of literature and wish to get any

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high pleasure from it. They will steep themselves and discipline themselves in the humanistic literatures, if for no other reason than because it will be necessary if they are to understand and enjoy the very extensive heritage from them in our own literatures.

An interesting (and enlightening to the non-classical student) illustration of this truth is presented in the first chapter of Gilbert Murray's *The Classical Tradition in Poetry*. He takes *Paradise Lost* as an example and shows from the opening lines how many of the images, forms, syntactical usages, and mannerisms are borrowed directly from classical poetry. (Any objection that Milton is more classical than most English poets is beside the point; all English poets are influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by the classics.) Even those who study English will be surprised at the extent of such influence unless they are aware of the facts. How many students are aware of the facts? Not a great many, if one is to judge, as one must, by classroom evidence.

A recent essayist declared that classical scholars today, instead of writing—in Latin—learned treatises, spend most of their time writing elaborate apologies for the classics. There is a grain of truth in this. Certainly there has been a profusion of defenses for the classics. But the scholars are compelled to them. So mighty a host of disciples of mechanical training, "business," and what have been termed ad hoc studies have appeared that the classicists are forced to take up arms or to suffer defeat. The enemies of Israel have increased in abundance. When educators like Dr. Abraham Flexner deny and ridicule the idea of receiving mental discipline from the study of Latin it makes humanists like Professor Paul Shorey indignant and resentful, and the partisans on each side pen jeremiads against the foe. What the final outcome will be remains to be seen. There is no doubt, however, that the anti-classical party has had the best of it so far.

And in their program what do they give us instead?

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Courses in salesmanship, insurance, dairy husbandry, accounting, and other technical or banausic courses that flourish like the green bay tree and make business "schools" of the colleges.

The conclusion of the whole matter is this: one cannot pretend to a correct understanding of literature, and therefore of life, unless he knows the records of the "collective experience of the race." If that conclusion seems trite we must remember that it is ignored in many quarters. The case for humanism was best stated by Matthew Arnold: "First, what a man seeks for his education is to get to know himself and the world. Next, for this knowledge it is before all things necessary that he acquaint himself with the best which has been thought and said in the world. Finally, of this best the classics of Greece and Rome form a very chief portion, and the portion most entirely satisfactory. With these conclusions lodged safe in one's mind, one is safe on the side of the humanities."

Craig Thompson.