Why Greek and Latin?

It is comforting, as a classical scholar, to think that the teaching of Greek and Latin in schools and universities extends continuously back to the Humanist movement of the sixteenth century; of course, in various forms, Latin has had a place in education there since antiquity, with the arrival of the Romans in the British Isles. This long tradition has had no small effect upon the development of the country. The observation of M.L. Clarke that under the Roman Empire the foreign language and literature of Greece 'was regarded as having a claim on the schoolboy no less strong than that of his own language and literature',[1] might equally be applied to the situation in schools in Britain throughout the years. Many young students have found themselves studying Greek and Latin with equal or greater attention than they applied to English. And why not so, when one might well write academic books and papers in Latin rather than in English and expect the wider community to be able to read them. Even in the relatively recent past, the Latin language has had an everyday place for educated Britons,

1 M.L. Clarke, *Classical Education in Britain*, Cambridge, 1959.

whether it was written or spoken, in the courtroom or the classroom, and one has traditionally been at a clear advantage if Latin numbered among one's accomplishments. Up until the second half of the last century, a reasonable level in Latin was even an entrance requirement for Oxford and Cambridge.

But, whatever comfort one takes in this very long tradition of Classical Studies, one must recognize that things have changed. In his presidential address to the Classical Association at Oxford in 1945, C.M. Bowra commented that at universities 'students of the Classics have shrunk to negligible numbers. At schools natural science has enjoyed a great tactical advantage... [and] one school, which has in its day produced scholars of eminence, has ceased to teach Greek because it finds no demand for it'.[2] Sadly for the contemporary classicist, all these things are more true today than they were in 1945. Outside a select number of private schools, the teaching of Greek is atop the endangered species list, and although Latin has enjoyed a more mild decline, and even something of a renaissance in recent years, it too has become a rare pursuit. Courses on

2 C.M. Bowra, 'A Classical Education', address to the Classical Association at Oxford, Oxford, 1945.

classical civilization in translation attract a certain number of enthusiastic students, but few opt to delve into the languages themselves. Science, computing and business are the areas of study which are perceived as leading to high-paying jobs and students follow these routes more often than degrees in Classics; many schools have stopped offering Greek and Latin today simply because there is no demand for them. The result of this situation in schools has of course been that fewer and fewer students study Classics at university, and those who do choose to study Classics often have a level of Greek and Latin when coming to university which is far below what that of their predecessors would have been. In fact, some students who now choose to study Classics at university come knowing only Latin, or neither Greek nor Latin, and they take up the languages when they arrive. With traditional approaches having focused attention upon language and grammar, this new state of affairs has obviously had a substantial effect upon how Classics are taught at university, and ultimately an effect upon how classical research is conducted at higher levels.

It is this question of the changing role of language teaching in Classics which I

wish to focus upon in this short article. I will first discuss the relevance of Greek and Latin language for modern education. With this in mind, I will then go on to discuss the importance of language teaching in the field of Classics at schools and university.

In an article on the introduction of a compulsory 'citizenship' component in the British school curriculum, Richard Pring notes in opposition to the move that 'already, history, geography and the arts are being squeezed out to make room for vocational alternatives.'[3] This raises the question of what education in the humanities is ultimately for. As the name implies, the humanities have traditionally been seen as an education in our own nature, or as Pring puts it, education "helping the young people become "more human"'. In short, the humanities have in past been perceived as beneficial in themselves, without any particular practical application required to make them an important and necessary part of education. Today, however, this approach to education has often faded into the background, overshadowed by the idea that education must

3 Richard Pring, 'Citizenship and Schools', *The Political Quarterly, Citizens: Towards a Citizenship Culture*, 2001, 81-89.

be practical. There is a lot more for the everyday person to learn in 2009 than there was in 1909; word processors, internet, television, economic and cultural issues associated with globalization have all become the concern of the common person and there is understandably a sense that education must be relevant to modern day concerns. One might reflect here that utilitarianism in education is not a new idea — Clarke notes that in the eighteenth century in England 'one schoolmaster, John Clarke of Hull, tried to adapt Locke's views on education to the requirements of school teaching and to revise the grammar-school system in the direction of common-sense utilitarianism' — but even if such a movement has existed before, it seems to be more pronounced now than it has ever been. As a result, it is more and more difficult to suggest that students should study the humanities, and in particular for our purposes Classics, simply for the benefit which their 'humanity' will derive from the process. University Classics departments around the world have now had to justify their existence and it is common-place to find posters on department walls, or pages on department web-sites, which list what one can 'do' with a Classics degree: the choices usually

include ‘teaching, museum or library work, and even banking’. Teachers of Classics are still passionate that the subject has inherent value, but one almost feels that this is a fact to be quiet about nowadays; as though something which is good for your ‘humanity’ cannot possibly be practical as well.

This is one area at least in which the linguistic side of the Classics should now be appreciated. In the new global community, language has become an increasingly central issue in government and private enterprise; it is clear that having a second language can help a university graduate to secure a job in, for example, the banking sector, corporate sales, or government. English may be the accepted ‘universal’ language of business, but one should not forget that more people speak Spanish natively than English, not to mention the importance of Chinese and Japanese in today’s boardrooms and meetings. But what, one may ask, does all this have to do with Greek and Latin? Should we not then concentrate upon modern languages rather than dead ones? With Greek there is a very simple answer to this question. Although it is often said to be, it is not in fact a dead language! Far from it, the Greek language still thrives today, and

notably in a member-country of the European Union. Every citizen of the European Union now sees not only Euro printed in Roman characters on their bank notes, but also Ε Υ Ρ Ο in Greek. Ancient Greek is a clear assistance for learning modern Greek, and for a mastery of literary modern Greek it is almost essential. It is in fact astounding to realize how many Homeric words are still commonly used in Modern Greek. Not only words themselves, but also ancient morphology and syntax can still be found in regional dialects today.

That said, the benefits of ancient Greek are certainly not confined to modern Greek. Nor is Latin useful only for learning Italian, the modern language to which it is perhaps most similar. It has long been recognized that both Greek and Latin are an invaluable base for learning any Indo-European language. The number of words in modern European languages which are derived from Greek and Latin is astounding, and it is a fact that learning these languages improves modern vocabularies. A knowledge of Greek and Latin allows the European student to use his own language more precisely by understanding the origin of many of the words he employs. And even where the similarity of vocabulary is

less emphasized, in Slavonic languages for example, Greek and Latin are still most helpful. The complicated grammar and syntax of the two languages forces one to understand grammar at its deepest levels, and the use of cases in Russian, Polish, or German seems much less daunting after a good dose of Greek. Bowra even commented in 1945 that the preceding years of war had shown how those who had studied Greek and Latin were able to take up more easily Chinese and Japanese. For the learning of almost any modern language, the combination of grammatical rigour and richness of vocabulary in Greek and Latin is invaluable.

Now, the reduced focus upon training in Greek and Latin in Classical Studies programmes in recent years has not been all bad. Several authors in James Morwood's recent collection of essays on classical education in fact speak with optimism about the current state of affairs.[4] As one author puts it, Classics departments are now more 'streamlined'. Previously, many pupils developed nothing more than a dislike for classical literature and languages as they were forced to study complex languages almost against their will, whereas now Greek

4 J. Morwood ed., *The Teaching of Classics*, Cambridge, 2003.

and Latin are pursued by few but passionate devotees. Moreover, as Bowra very perceptively recognized as far back as 1945, a singular emphasis upon language in Classical studies can be limiting; Greek and Latin are not only interesting for their complex grammatical structures. In fact, perhaps the most attractive aspect of the two languages is that a knowledge of them opens the door to a rich collection of literature and ideas. When reading only with the acquisition of language in mind, it is not uncommon for students to read half or even just a quarter of a work in order to be able to concentrate upon understanding the language at the tiniest detail.

Close reading in the original language should be approached alongside broader study of the ancient world. And the fact is that teachers can no longer afford to focus only upon close reading of Greek and Latin. Whereas in the past there was a steady stream of students who were sent to study the Classics, Greek and Latin literature must now be sold on the market of education. This market is as competitive as any other, and what sells, in the beginning at least, are the adventures of the Greeks at Troy and the fantastic voyage of Odysseus, not the

fact that the Homeric language is a treasure-house of grammatical peculiarities and interesting morphology. Classical literature has the power to capture the imagination of our children, and we are now doing that more effectively. Schools who do offer Latin and Greek now place more focus upon classical civilization as a whole. By attracting children to Classics in this way at younger ages, we can ensure a generation of students who will master Greek and Latin at later ages out of a love of the subject and who will create a strong future for our field. Although my education focused a great deal upon the ancient languages, it is my first, more general contact with the Classics that moved me to pursue the subject at the university level. As a teenager, a Cypriote woman, the mother of a friend of mine, agreed to tutor me in the Greek language. I still recall with vividness an experience which inspired me to study Classics once and for all. While reading the passage in the *Iliad* where Patroclus is killed by Hector, my teacher was so moved by the episode that she began to cry. My thought at that time was that, if this literature is so powerful that it can move someone to tears, it is something which I need to know more about. Without these experiences, I may never have

become interested in morphology, linguistics, syntax, dialects and all the things which I now spend my time on.

This is not, however, to say that language can be ignored altogether. In 1837 C.R. Kennedy,[5] in a rather traditionalist discussion of classical education in Britain at that time, remarked that 'the fruits of literature can evidently not be enjoyed without a due appreciation of the beauties of language'. As I have suggested above, this is to some degree an exaggeration (a good deal of appreciation can be gained in translation), but such a view is not entirely misplaced; language and literature can hardly be separated. It would perhaps be better to say that a full appreciation of classical literature cannot be gained without an understanding of the languages, in the same way that a full appreciation of Dostoyevsky requires Russian, but the genius of Dostoyevsky is appreciated to some degree around the world in translation. The difference here seems to me to be one of specialization. To continue with the example of Dostoyevsky, a translation of the Brothers Karamazov is an acceptable way for

5 C.R. Kennedy, *Classical Education Reformed*, London, 1837.

the average English reader, who is not able to master the Russian language, to appreciate the story and ideas which are contained within the work. But one would naturally expect that an academic conducting research on Dostoyevsky, or a teacher of Russian literature, would have a knowledge of the Russian language. The case must be the same in Classics. It is always a pleasure to hear that a friend has bought a translation of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* and is enjoying the poems, or even comparing them to his own field of research, but serious research on Homer or Vergil requires Greek and Latin, just as does the profound study of any aspect of the Greek and Roman worlds.