

Why the Classics?

by Denis O'Brien

The argument that the study of Latin and Greek is justified because it disciplines or trains the mind is a weak one. Taken to its extreme it involves the fallacy that training for an activity is separable from that activity itself; that you can train a mind to discover the truth, without the person whose mind it is having to decide whether any part of his experience is in fact true or false. You cannot do this. If you are to learn the truth, or some part of the truth, then you must learn the truth. There is no preliminary activity you can engage in which makes you able to know, without actually knowing anything. The only way to train the mind is to use the mind: and to use the mind you must direct it to something outside the mind: something that is worth while in itself.

How worthwhile then in themselves are Greek and Latin? Simply as languages they have no special magic. If you want to learn a language more firmly inflected than English, you might quite happily learn German. If you want to enter a new world of language, then learn Russian. This does not mean that we should decry the purely linguistic study of Latin and Greek – writing prose, and verse too, if you want. But it should be seen for what it is: a technique, a mental craft. In itself, versatility in writing Latin and Greek has little to do with the mind's awakening to truth: with the fullness of education: with the kind of education one has a right to look for at a university.

This is obvious, until you notice the undergraduate, and the occasional don, who because he excels in the writing of Ciceronian prose implicitly lays claim to an intellectual preeminence which is quite grotesque. Linguistic skill is skill. It is not wisdom, nor hardly the beginning of wisdom. And although it might perhaps make some dons shift a little, wisdom, a kind of wisdom, must be the aim of a university education worthy of the name.

I have exaggerated. If you can write a good Ciceronian prose, or better, a piece of Greek that might pass for Lysias, you have acquired more than a linguistic skill in the narrowest sense. Apart from grammar and vocabulary and idiom, you have felt the touch of style and rhythm. And there your mind begins to come alive, to have movements that are more than mechanical.

But the sense of style displayed by even the most skilful versifier is still a pretty limited thing. Style, it is true, is more than mere ornamentation. At its root it is inseparable from the act of thought. But the style

of Latin and Greek cannot be part of our thinking today. It is, in a curious way, part of the charm, part of the importance even, of the classical languages that they are closed as living modes of expression. No one today can say again quite what Plato said, because no one can speak again entirely in the language and the rhythms that Plato knew. The reproduction of the ancient moulds, which in a scholar's hands can be brought to such perfection, and can be the source of very real delight, is sterile, if it is made in itself an end of education.

It should not need saying but it does – and because the student is blind as often as his teacher is – that the purpose of learning Latin and Greek is to be able to read Latin and Greek. The purpose of writing perfect prose or exquisite verse is to be able to read in depth, to feel the very flow of the language, to hear almost the living intonation of someone dead two thousand years. The mind has an almost uncanny sensibility in this respect. But let no one think that he is exerting his powers to the full, or laying some priceless jewel before the young, in being able to reproduce the words and sounds of the classical languages without their substance. For their substance no one now can reproduce. The only purpose therefore of writing Latin and Greek is to be able to read: to read in depth.

We look again then for the true value of Latin and Greek. And now we can look where but for current misconceptions we should have been able to look from the start: not at a training of the brain, not at a linguistic skill even in the broader sense, but at the classical world itself. How obvious it is, but how it has been overlaid, that whatever value the study of Greek and Latin has lies in the past, in what was done and said and thought and felt in Greece itself and in the Roman world, and in our continuing knowledge of that past. But where in the past?

There is one approach, to be found for example in Symonds¹, which depends on the sense that there is a certain beauty which is at once perfect and unchanging; and that such beauty is to be found with peculiar radiance and distinctness in the productions of ancient Greece, and perhaps of ancient Rome; and that the study of such perfection, even though now preserved often in a fragmentary form, brings to the mind a delight and a satisfaction that requires no justification other than itself.

This is true. But it is only part of the truth. In a poem of Sappho or in an early fifth century *kore* there is a beauty and a pleasure which in itself and at once makes good the after all not so arduous learning of Greek or the study of Greek sculpture. But aesthetics are not enough. Beauty yes: but beauty of this kind is not the sole and ultimate end of education, of the mind's fullest development. The mind must have more besides.

¹See for example the last two chapters of *Studies of the Greek Poets*, 3rd edition, London, 1893.

Then there is another, a more pragmatic approach. It is noticeable how a student who has familiarized himself with even a limited field of enquiry achieves thereby a balance and maturity of mind. If you want more than or other than aesthetic joy, then take this: the confidence and awareness that comes from knowing a good deal about something; and that in a rather strange way is common to people who know a good deal about quite different things.

But still this is inadequate. A university should provide more than the knowledge of a part of reality. A university should teach in effect what I would call philosophy: an attempt in some way to know the whole of reality. I do not mean overt philosophy – though there will of course be a place for this too – but philosophy of an implicit kind: the philosophy that is implied, or can be, in the study of history or economics or anything else. The teaching of every subject at a university should have this philosophical cast. It should open the mind in some senses to the whole of reality. If not, the university is failing to provide an education in the fullest sense.

This philosophic cast can be achieved only indirectly. Paradoxically, if you set out to be a philosophical linguist or a philosophical economist, you most often turn out to be a poor economist, and an incompetent linguist. I do not want languages to try and provide themselves with a metaphysic of language, nor the faculty of history to offer a preliminary course in the philosophy of historical theory. If you could have a metaphysic of language, then that would belong already to the overt study of philosophy or of logic. Still less do I want some general compulsory course: Paley's *Evidences of Christianity* brought back; or a course for everyone on 'The History of European Thought'. The dissatisfaction which breeds this kind of excrescence on the normal curriculum may be a healthy sign. But the cure is worse than the disease. You cannot teach as it were pure relevance. If you try to, you may do harm.

The philosophical cast should be embedded entirely in the particularities of each subject. There is no external distinction which can ensure that a subject is taught philosophically, and not imparted merely as a craft. How can the classics contribute to this philosophical kind of education?

It would be easy and simple to suppose that each mind is born anew, to face reality with freshly opened eyes, unburdened with the labours of its ancestors. But it is not so. At least by the time we begin an active thinking life our vision has been encrusted with a large assortment of ideas, some beneficial, others not.

Now, for us, part of this experience is a classical experience. By this I mean that it was brought to fruition in the classical world, and has continued or has been revived in us. This does not mean that we share in this experience willy nilly: that we can take this experience for

granted. By our own act we have to make that experience our own. But it is one of the advantages of civilisation and of scholarship that once an experience has been won for us we can relive it comparatively simply; so that then we are free to draw in fresh experience of our own. In this process of absorption a knowledge, at least implicit, of the classical past is essential. And classical scholars have some right to hope that it is by their labours that this implicit knowledge is maintained.

This is not quite the line of *The Glory that was Greece* or of those books on 'Our Classical Heritage'. I am not suggesting that we owe an overwhelming debt to Roman aqueducts or even Roman law or to the Greek view (supposedly – in fact a very fringe affair) that 'man is the measure of all things'. These points are comparatively trivial. As an example of the kind of experience which we owe to the ancient world and which is important I would offer instead the classical understanding of being.

Normally Christians live in an ontological universe that is Greek. Some recently may fret at what they suppose are Greek metaphysics. I think they have confused what is Greek with what is scholastic, and late scholastic at that. The understanding of being which was evolved in the ancient world in the course of some eight centuries is not, I think, something we shall outgrow; nor do we need to outgrow it, because it is true. Of course we need to know and learn more. But in essentials the understanding of being achieved by the Greek world is a true intuition: an intuition of what exists.

What is this ontological universe which we owe to the Greeks? It is simple, and familiar of course: but nonetheless its appreciation is vital to the mind's proper development. The Greek understanding of being is essentially a distinction of kinds of being: the distinction of material or spatial from spiritual being; the distinction of abstract from spiritual being; and within the spiritual realm the distinction of non-transcendent from transcendent being. This last distinction overshadows all the rest.

The first distinction, that between spatial and non-spatial being, was Plato's great achievement; though made possible only by a hundred years or more of intense philosophical activity before his day. Plato's Forms, though so much decried, do represent a permanent, though of course an imperfect, achievement of the human mind. Plato's Forms were the first example of being freed from space.

We may laugh at Plato's Forms. But we can do so only because knowingly or unknowingly we have sat at the feet of Aristotle. It was Aristotle who saw that the spiritual was not the abstract. Many of Plato's Forms, especially the ones which Plato himself discarded, we can see now, thanks to Aristotle, were no more than falsely spiritualized abstractions. There is no Form of bed. What Plato thought was the Form of bed was our idea of bed.

But not all Plato's Forms were abstractions masquerading as spiritual entities. Aristotle successfully distinguishes the material from the abstract, the sensible world from our knowledge of it. But Plato's Formal world was not all abstractions. Aristotle continues to recognize that there is a being which is non-spatial and which exists independently of our awareness of it. This is Aristotle's unmoved mover, the heir to Plato's Forms of the beautiful and of the good, just as the Form of bed is the origin of Aristotle's properly abstract bed.

To recognize our debt to Aristotle does not reduce us to Aristotelians. A humanist could perhaps acclimatise himself to Aristotle's world. A Christian would suffocate. Aristotle's god is perfect, so far as Aristotle could envisage perfection. But it is lacking in that transcendence which Plotinus saw, and which set the One apart from all reality, apart from Aristotle's unmoved mover thinking of itself, apart from any merely non-spatial being².

Again this does not mean that the study of the ancient world leaves us neo-Platonists. Revelation, apart from its own specific content, assured God's full transcendence. The Son does not proceed from the Father as the world proceeded from God. Reflection on the Trinity finally freed transcendent God from dependence on the world.

With the full acknowledgment of God's transcendence our ontological universe is in some sense complete. There has been achieved a lasting characterization of the human mind. The primary senses of being have been recognized: the difference between God and the world whose existence is in his hand; the difference between the spiritual and the material world, or between angels and sensible creation. Man is an animal with sensible powers, who however else he knows the world knows it in some sense spiritually, by the power of abstraction.

This experience is a permanent gain. Read the *Cloud of Unknowing*, and hear the author deride the false understanding of the word 'up'³:

Forth of our matter. How that these young presumptuous ghostly disciples misunderstand this other word *up*. For if it so be that they either read, or hear read or spoken, how that men should *lift up their hearts unto God*, at once they stare in the stars as if they would be above the moon, and hearken if they shall hear any angel sing out of heaven. These men will sometimes with the curiosity of their imagination pierce the planets, and make a hole in the firmament to look in thereat. These men will make a God as they like, and clothe him full richly in clothes, and set him on a throne, far more curiously than ever was he depicted on this earth. . . I grant well that in our bodily observance we should lift up our eyes and our hands if we be

²Leading passages are *Enneads* III. 8. 9-11 and V. 3. 17. Some of those who feel at home in Aristotle's philosophy I suspect have read into it ideas of transcendence taken from a later age.

³Chapter 57, from McCann's edition.

stirred in spirit. But I say that the work of our spirit shall not be directed neither upwards nor downwards, not on one side nor on the other, nor forward nor backward, as it is with a bodily thing. Because our work should be ghostly, not bodily, nor in a bodily manner wrought.

Here the author of the *Cloud* is reliving a classical experience. Parmenides and Plato are an essential, even if only an implicit, element in the experience described in the *Cloud*.

Of course it is obvious to us, or to most of us, that God is not 'up' in this literal sense, any more than he is 'beyond', or in this same literal sense 'within'. But although the idea is obvious it is nonetheless important. This insight must be retained unimpaired. If, as may happen, and as appears to have happened recently, this insight ceases to be obvious, then that is a sign that effort is needed to renew our experience of the classical past.

This then is part of my justification of classical learning. The ancient world provides essential elements in our present experience. The understanding of being is one example of peculiar importance. It is far from the only example⁴.

But if this were all, the classical contribution to education would be a merely conservative one. Classical learning would be a work of maintenance. The living edge of thought would be reserved to others.

This is not so. I described our dependence on the experience of others. We need to draw on other people's experience and incorporate it into our own, before we can add significantly to the sum of our own experience. But there is another relationship between the experience of others or of the past and our own. In adding to our experience we depend again on the past. For only by having relived intimately the way in which others reached out to something new, can we in our turn reach out to something new. We do not do the same as they have done. And yet there is some analogy between our activity and theirs. By living again the experience of the past, and not merely admiring it from without, we are able precisely to break away from the past, to add to past experience some significant insight of our own.

To throw out an example of this analogy of activities can easily make the process I describe seem trivial. But I will risk giving an example of the kind of classical experience which when relived can provide the stimulus for an insight into something new.

The classical world was for most of its life a pagan world. This in itself gives it now a peculiar interest. For in attempting to share in depth the experience of that world, a world in other ways close to our own, and with affinities to our own which no other pagan culture

⁴The revival of classical ideas, it could be argued, figures in nineteenth century political writers, John Stuart Mill, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche, all of whom knew the classics at first hand.

provides, we can hope to see with increased clarity the elements in our experience that are properly Christian. For attitudes that we do not share with the Greeks have a *prima facie* claim to be part of, or off-shoots or perversions of, revealed experience, whether Jewish or Christian. Thus the complex of experiences that cluster round the Tristan and Isolde myth⁵ is an example of experience which but for its absence in the pagan world would not be easily recognizable as a distinctively Christian experience, even if perhaps a perverted one.

Now in the ancient world the history of the progressive distinction of the kinds of being was characterized in a peculiar way. It is difficult to appreciate this without a detailed study of the texts; but roughly the point is this. Each advance in thought was contained implicitly in what had preceded. The Presocratics had a single vision. Being for them was of one kind only, essentially material. But it was not material in the sense in which being with Plato and after Plato could be material. Presocratic being is not 'material' in the Platonic sense, precisely because it is not distinguished from spiritual or non-spatial being. Implicitly Presocratic being is spiritual and abstract and even transcendent. It is a complex thing, which is material primarily because there is only one kind of being, and therefore it has to be, as well as being in embryo much else, the being which we see and feel and touch.

Something similar is true of Plato's Forms. They are not simply spiritual. They are not simply abstract. In a curious way they are both at once. What we can say clearly of Plato's Forms and not of Parmenides' sphere is that they are not spatial.

As an essay in potted classics the last two paragraphs are bound to fail. You must hear the very words: watch the precise point at which a writer's mind glosses over a distinction that later will be crucial. You must watch the shift in certainty: from what a philosopher knows to what he thinks must be entailed by what he knows. You must hear Parmenides describe a Platonic Form: and then say it is like a sphere; because unless it was a sphere and spatial Parmenides supposes it would have to be a void and not exist. You must listen to Plato⁶ dither over whether the Forms are alive – surely they cannot just stand there, dumb and motionless? – and then hastily say they are not alive: because if they were alive, and moved, they would not be the firm objects of thought. You must have knowledge of the future too; know more than Plato did; know that precisely from that point there will spring Aristotle's distinction of spiritual god and abstractions in the mind.

It is this implicit character in the development of Greek thought which I want to recreate in an entirely non-Greek experience: the development of doctrine within the Catholic Church.

⁵As described by de Rougemont, *L'amour et l'occident*.

⁶*Sophist* 247D-250E.

Newman's work here is vital. Properly understood it gives a meaningless artificial air to much of the present discussion over the question of one source of revelation or two. But Newman's work for all its excellence has itself a mechanical air for anyone who is aware of the progress from implicit to explicit thought which I have described as characteristic of Greek philosophy. Here is another example of grace informing nature; or rather the reverse, of God embedding natural faculties at the very heart of his supernatural gifts. Development, precisely the development from implicit to explicit, the student of Greek philosophy will recognize is a natural mode of human thought. And it appears again at the very heart of Christian revelation.

Theology is not simply the repetition of what Christ told his Apostles. Neither is it the discovery of truths that are wholly new. It is the explicitation of an experience that was given once by Christ to his disciples, and is limited now to the Christian church, the body of Christ. In developing Christian doctrine we are not discovering truths that were wholly unknown to the Apostles. There is in that sense no new revelation. And yet when the Holy Ghost tells us things that the Apostles 'were not able to bear'⁷, he is telling us things that in some sense the Apostles did not know. They did not know them because these 'new' truths though present were but implicitly present in the primitive body of revelation.

Therefore if you develop a harsh, *a priori* distinction between fundamentalism and development, or between scripture and tradition, you will not understand how the early Church could both know and not know that Christ was of one substance with the Father. You will not understand how for centuries the Church could include limbo as a regular part of her thinking: and how we today need not do so, because we realize that limbo is not entailed by our certain faith that redemption depends on Christ. More important, you will not understand quite what it means to belong to the body of Christ in its fullest sense: to be able to participate precisely in this living development, in this living explicitation of the body of truth, of the new experience, which Christ left to his Apostles, and to the Church which most truly lives in them. The Orthodox share our faith in Christ as God. They share our sacraments. They have a liturgy which equals, perhaps surpasses, our own. But they do not share – it is partly our fault – as intimately as we do in the continuing nature of Christ's revelation of himself to his chosen people.

The student of Greek philosophy, of Greek philosophy at first hand, has a special insight here. Once the Greeks had asked themselves what was the whole of reality, once Anaximander had attempted to break out of the Homeric world, and had sought to discover the whole of what exists, then men's feet were set on the path that would lead to Plato, to

⁷St John 16: 12-13; cf. 15: 25-26.

Aristotle and to Plotinus. In a similar way – we should not draw the parallel too closely – the Apostles' eyes were opened to a new world of truth, to Christ, the incarnate son of God, and to the Trinity. And as with the Greeks, the new vision could not be seen at once in its totality. In one sense it is new and complete at the moment of its birth. But it is a creature rich with the potentialities of what is as yet only partly understood, of what is as yet only partially seen. Christ's testament is new and eternal. His revelation is given once and for all. Yet our acceptance of his revelation is a continuing act: and the constant explicitation of that revelation in every age is at once a test and a manifestation of our continuing intimacy with Christ⁸.

This then is one example, one way in which I see a knowledge of the Classics, in this instance of classical philosophy, performing a vital function in the deepening of a part of our experience that is itself not classical.

It is not simply therefore that we must preserve and relive the insights of the classical age. We must all do that. In that sense we must all be classicists; although no doubt we shall need classicists in the stricter sense to preserve those insights in their full vigour. But there is this other, perhaps more vital, function, for which we depend on a yet more intimate and living association with the classical past. By reliving the experience of the classical past, we gain the power to see more deeply into experience that is not classical. The past in this way liberates us from the past, in the sense of an exclusive dependence on the past. By deepening our experience of the substance of ancient thought, we can achieve a new understanding of our own experience, even of our own peculiarly Christian experience.

Some qualifications are vital.

Science and technology have nothing to do with my thesis. The classics cannot be defended in isolation against a scientific education. And how foolish is that notion of 'defence', except on the purely practical level, when there may be a battle for more books or for more money. If you seriously doubt the value of an 'arts' education in general as against a scientific one, then you need to have put before you considerations of quite another kind.

Secondly, I have said nothing of cultures other than those of Greece and Rome: nothing of Persia, India or China. The classical world has a special claim in that it is already part of our permanent awareness. Whether elements from other cultures should be introduced into our own, whether their study too would stimulate us to fresh insight, is another enquiry: one that has not been prejudged by anything that I have said.

⁸It is obvious I hope that I am not attempting to give a complete account of the development doctrine. The place of reasoned reflection in this explicitation of doctrine, the nature of our collective certainty, and other questions have been left aside.

In particular I have said nothing of the Hebrew tradition. This is peculiarly relevant, because this too has in some sense become part of our permanent awareness, and perhaps only inadequately so. Some kind of alignment between the Hebrew and the Greek tradition was attained in the ancient world, notably by Augustine. Today we may suspect that this was perhaps imperfectly done. Perhaps there is some vital element in the Hebrew tradition that has been lost; extruded even by the Greek and the scholastic in us; and which we must regain.

Here again I plead silence. I have not claimed that all the classical elements in our present awareness are beneficial. If we have taken over the bad with the good, that in a sense is our own fault. I could have drawn the darker side of the picture. For one example I would have chosen personality. The person, the workings and the nature of our innermost self, the way in which our personality is incomplete in itself and has to be completed by our love for another: here the Greeks were for the most part blind; and tragically we have most of us chosen to perpetuate their blindness⁹.

But this again gives a special value to the study of the Classics. The Greek world was far from being an unsullied spring of truth and beauty, a paradise darkened and distorted by a later age. Because we suffer from a false, an uncritical absorption of some parts of Greek culture, we again have a motive for studying that culture in depth, precisely in order to liberate ourselves from its failings.

By all means therefore wrest from the experience of the Hebrews or from your own a new awareness of a more intimate kind than in the Christian west we now normally lay claim to, an awareness perhaps that is not quite speculative, not quite aesthetic. To do this you will not need to lose or break your continuity with the classical past. Purify that continuity if you will. For the rest a reliving of the experience of the ancient world may itself be the means for reaching forward to a dimension of experience which the Greeks themselves did not lay claim to.

⁹I mean primarily in formal writings on philosophy and theology. An exception is Moberley in his *Personality and the Atonement*. It is a pity to see this vital work referred to disparagingly by the late Fr Victor White in one of his essays in *God the Unknown*, p.104.