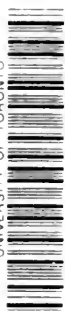


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## The Benefits of Classical Studies for the Physician

Part of a Symposium on "The Humanities and the Professions."

DR. J. T. FOTHERINGHAM, TORONTO.

Permit me first to congratulate myself upon the company in which again I find myself, you teachers whose ranks I left, at least whose particular branch of teaching I left, sixteen years ago, though still glad to consider myself one of you both in name and in fact. One's pleasure in his present position is not enhanced by the reflection that the ancient profession for which I have the honor to speak must be content for the time with so poor a spokesman and champion, when one's colleagues are men so well known in their own spheres as Mr. Justice Riddell and Reverend Professor McCurdy. As that most famous and lovable member of my profession, Sir Thos. Brown, said long ago in his "Religio Medici," "Every man is not a proper champion for truth nor fit to take up the gauntlet in the cause of verity. A man may be in as just possession of truth as of a city and yet be forced to surrender; it is, therefore, far better to enjoy her with peace than to hazard her on a battle." But here there are no battles, no ardent protagonists, no rival claims; rather a paean, a chorus with strophé and antistrophé, in praise of the benefits to be derived from the Greek and Latin classics by any of the learned professions. Comparisons of course are odious, and one would avoid belittling even by implication, if it were possible to avoid it, other courses of preparatory study. The advantages of the classics may be considered first in their *general*, and second in their *special* application to medicine. Speaking first generally, physician and layman alike should avail themselves when possible of the innocent and elevating pleasure which always accompanies the exercise of the literary faculty. The musician, the artist, the architect, the builder of great works, the organizer of great deeds on the part of the army, the navy, the nation, are here on common ground, and find in the exercise of their highest intellectual and aesthetic faculties the most subtle and highly

sensitized forms of pleasure. As F. W. H. Myers has said: "For myself, I am no fanatical advocate of a classical education, a form of training which must needs lose its old unique position, now that there is so much else to know. But for one small class of students such an education still seems to me essential, for those, namely, who desire to judge the highest poetry aright." The antidote *par excellence* to carking care, to the mordant tooth of daily professional anxiety, is the soothing balm and healing wine and oil of even ten minutes' communing with the sweetness of Theocritus or Catullus, the sprightly Bohemian worldly wisdom of Horace with his "*Qui fit, Maecenas?*" Or "the rise and long roll of the Hexameter," like the roll of "the wandering fields of barren foam" which Ulysses sailed in weary journeyings, or "the ringing plains of windy Troy," where Helen's beauty and frailty wrought woe to men and to armies and to nations, as so often before and since.

And apart from the satisfaction of slaking one's literary thirst at the fountain head of classics, I venture to express a doubt whether that thirst can be fully slaked by anyone drinking lower down the stream, as in Shakespeare, Milton, Tennyson, or Scott, or any other writer of one's native tongue. For felicity of phrase and synonym, dexterity of syntactical arrangement, and fine nuances of thought and sentiment, are very apt to be missed by those who have not been drilled in the comparative anatomy of language, with the *De Amicitia*, or the *De Corona*, or the Republic, or the Nicomachean Ethics, or the vivid terseness and condensation of Tacitus, or the silvery prolixity of Livy, as their text-books and models. As James Russell Lowell, himself a convincing example of the advantages of a classical training, classically and beautifully phrased it, in an oration on the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Harvard, "The garnerers of Sicily are empty now, but the bees from all climes still fetch honey from the tiny garden plot of Theocritus. On a map of the world you may cover Judea with your thumb, Athens with your finger-tip, and neither of them figures in the Prices-Current, but they still lord it in the thought and action of every civilized man."

Speaking now of the more special need which the trained physician has of the Classics, one would refer first to their value as mental gymnastics, secondly to their indispensability in the matter of scientific nomenclature and classification, thirdly to their

influence not on mental habits alone but on character and disposition, particularly in the development of a wise and judicious conservatism and of a kindly Bohemianism, a willingness to be, as the diplomat and the physician must alike be, "all things to all men."

First, then, as to the value of the classics as mental gymnastics. I assume that it is the boy and not the young man who is to go through this gymnastic course, in which the various intellectual powers find fitting exercise, and in the order of their embryonic development, memory, reflection, the hardening of the will into habits of industry application, accuracy, *verbatim* and *literatim*, being all duly cultivated, and cultivated in proper developmental order. I cannot refrain, gentlemen, from the expression here, as a digression, of my positive opinion—born some may say of the conservatism which unwisely asks, "What is the cause that the former days were better than these?"—that some modern educationists are in error in their search for a Royal Road to learning, and are spending in this search an energy which would carry them more directly to the goal if they faced and accepted difficulty in the good old direct way. They seem also with all their pedagogical improvements and child study to have ended up, if one can judge from what he sees of school-children nowadays, in a very serious neglect of the primordial order of development of the faculties of the human mind. The attempt is constantly being made to convert into a thinking machine by means of mathematics that which should be not a conceiving but a perceiving and registering and memorizing machine. So that at the age when subjects and books should be few, and memory should be in process of cultivation, with models of literary excellence studied and stowed away for future imitation and enjoyment, and the perceptive faculties duly awakened, the attempt is made to make the child the father of the man without due periods of puberty and adolescence, a system which is at least in large part to blame for the shallow superficial Philistinism and pseudo-culture of the present day. The teaching profession is not wholly to blame for this state of affairs. The printing press must bear its share. About 1630 Sir Thos. Brown wrote thus: "It is not a melancholy wish of my own, but the Desires of better heads, that there were a general Synod; not to unite the incompatible Difference of Religion, but for the benefit of Learning, to recover

it as it lay at first, in a few and solid Authors; and to condemn to the Fire those swarms and millions of Rhapsodies begotten only to distract and abuse the weaker Judgments of Scholars, and to *maintain the Trade and Mystery of Typographers.*" What could the dear philosopher and physician say nowadays of the *fliegende blätter* of the press, which blow into our houses on every passing breeze from Sunday-school library and newstand alike, in at one ear, out at the other, skimmed over, not read but glanced through wrong end first; leaving superficiality, inaccuracy, philistinism in their wake, if nothing worse. May I venture to beg your profession to come fully to the consciousness that you are our bulwark against this tide, and should help powerfully in the creation of a proper public opinion in the matter? The boy who can be shown the depth and purity and condensation of literary interest and style to be found in the Greek and Latin writings, can be fully trusted not to wander far if once he can be carried past the drudgery of the early years, and it should be clearly understood that this drudgery is not only a means but an end; a means whereby the later pleasant fruition of scholarship and literary pleasure and polish may be attained; but an end, as indicated in my first sub-head, as gymnastics for the mind. One need not try to go again over ground so familiar to us all.

As to my second sub-head, the necessity of the classics as a source of nomenclature in all branches of scientific study, one need not enlarge here. Without an enormous medical dictionary as his life-preserver the medical student of to-day is floundering and wallowing in a sea of terminology, mostly to be got up *vi et armis* by the belated and laborious exercise of that faculty of memory which he should have had trained with much greater facility at a much earlier date on the roots which he now fails to recognize in their new combination, which therefore have no pictorial value to him. One example will suffice. The sperm whale, of course, "blows" when he comes up to breathe. His huge head constitutes nearly one-third of his enormous bulk. Hence to the well-trained naturalist who first named him, he was *Physeter Macrocephalus*. What possible significance can the name have to the student who was permitted carefully to exclude Latin, and Greek so many times the more, in selecting his optional preparatory course? He cannot even see the point when for



mnemonic reasons it is translated for him "Big-headed Blowhard." But besides this, he probably lacks the mental punctilio, which admittedly if carried too far becomes pedantry, but which always characterizes the finished product in educational matters, and which all must admit is not the usual result of a bare training in the sciences.

My third sub-head had reference to the influence of the classics not on mental habits but on character and disposition, as required of the physician by his patients. The two outstanding traits in my judgment, to fit the physician for his duty towards the multifarious types of humanity whom he must study and conciliate, are conservatism of opinion and tempered Bohemianism of disposition.

As to the first of these, one may remind you that the famous lexicographer once said to Boswell, "In my opinion, sir, every sick man is a villain!" By this he doubtless meant that as self-preservation is the first law of Nature, the sick one and his friends in their fear of death drop from them any acquired veneer of manner or restraint, and appear naked as they are, the courageous, good and thoughtful patient remaining so to the last, and those who are only outwardly in possession of these traits being deserted by them when the pinch of fear comes. Be that as it may, no sick one desires to be experimented on with drugs or other measures untried before, and no careful physician will venture to use on his own cases new and untried remedies, however willing he may be to accept results with new remedies well accredited by laboratory experiments or in other men's practice. Josh Billings, you know, once announced that he had discovered the best place for a boil, viz., on some other fellow.

This is part of the wholesome conservatism which, while it has probably at times delayed advance in the healing art, and even led to such sad examples of the *Odium Medicum* as that which attached to pioneers like Harvey, with the Circulation of the Blood, and Jenner with Vaccination, has undoubtedly been for the good of the sick in all ages. This type of mind is, I believe, most effectively induced by classical study, with its prevailing influence towards what is old and good and beautiful. This was the reason which induced the Czar of Russia to order a few years ago a great extension of the study of classics in the universities

of the Empire. He thought, mistakenly, if one may judge by subsequent events, that men trained thus would be less radical and reforming in their notions. The probability is that a second and smaller Renaissance has gone on in Russia as a result, as it did in its time in all the other parts of Europe, and that the conserving and unradical influence of classical study can remain unimpeached. I venture, too, to say that in my judgment there is not a mere coincidence, but a direct causal connection, between the advent of modern scientific medicine with its laboratory and test-tube methods, "made in Germany" largely, and popular therapeutic aberrations, such as Christian Science and the "irregular" methods of treatment. The people love a thaumaturgist, they will have a "priest-physician," it is a primordial need, for soundness of soul and mind depends so largely upon soundness of body, and vice-versa, and the need of moral support is often even more keenly felt by the sick than that of physical healing. The older type of physician with the conservatism and kindness born of a less purely scientific training, possibly met this need of the people more fully than the newer type whose training, at any rate till mellowed by contact with the sick, leads him perhaps at times to treat the disease rather than the patient.

How very conservative the profession is to which I belong a single example will suffice to show. The cross on the tail of the capital R which heads each prescription we write is a survival of the capital D from Dia, the vocative case of Zeus, and is really the prayer with which the Greek priest-physician invoked the aid of Jupiter and his blessing on the means employed. You will recollect the use made of this by Charles Reade in his "Very Hard Cash," in which the heroine, being in love, is brought up to London by her mother, who has not guessed her real ailment, to see the physicians, and they all with one consent cry, "Oh, Jupiter, aid us! Blue Pill and Black Draught."

Finally, as to the Bohemianism to which I have referred. The term is perhaps too strong. I mean at least that it be well controlled, usually latent, available only on occasion when some scarred or blunted nature can be tempted into confidence only by a bait whose colors are familiar to him. This quality of mind must be well tempered by that dash of Puritanism and strength without which the Bohemian may condescend to deeper than

human depths. Where can one better learn this kind of worldly wisdom, this discriminating sympathetic knowledge of human nature, than from the literature of Greece and Rome? For instance, "*De gustibus non est disputandum*," or, as Abraham Lincoln put it, "Well, for people that like that sort of thing, that must be the sort of thing they like." How many times I have thought of this when, after my best efforts at concealing an unpalatable dose let us say by peppermint, I have been met next morning by the cry, "O Doctor, what a horrid medicine you left me! Why *did* you put peppermint in it?" This disposition to give and take, so necessary to all who would maintain confidential relations with the public does not commonly reside in the mere Puritan.

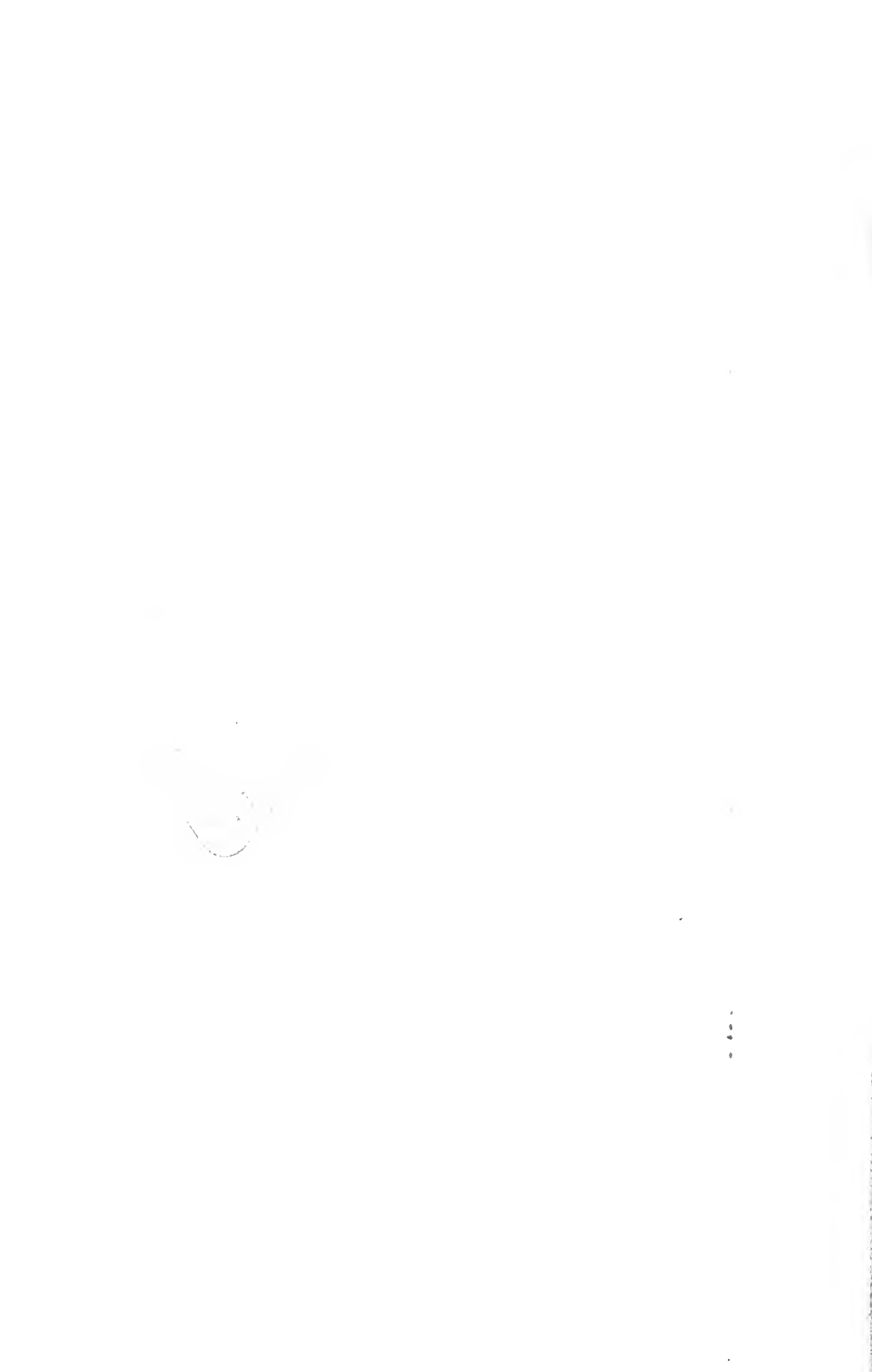
I well remember President Hutton, of the University here, telling us in one of the Saturday lectures that the best possible historical study for the politician of to-day is that of the Greek republics, the springs and motives of human action remaining unchanged throughout the centuries, and evolution in her course leaving human nature, like the rocks, much as she finds it. If Pope's line be true that "the proper study of mankind is man," where can one better go than to the humane and human Greek to study him? Sophocles makes his chorus sing, "Many marvels are there, but nothing more marvellous than man himself." The very anthropomorphism of the Greek mythology and religion fosters the graceful Bohemianism which I have in mind.

It would seem odd to conclude my remarks without an allusion to classical medicine. The debt which the medicine of to-day owes to the ancient Greek seems to grow less as our knowledge widens of Nature and her processes and laws, and as the purely scientific crowds out the clinical and the empiric in the Healing Art. But for the first fifteen centuries of our era all that the world knew of value in medicine was Greek, buried and lost to Christendom in the blight of the Dark Ages till brought again to light in the Arabian translations, which were for centuries the text-books for instance in the great and prosperous University of Baghdad, and others of the Far East. Here, in the 8th and 9th centuries particularly, the light was kept burning for hundreds of students which had been kindled centuries before Christ on the altars of Apollo and Asclepias. And of all the long line of

Asclepiadæ from that day to this no name shines brighter, ancient or modern, than that of Hippocrates, the model physician, the Father of Medicine, Ancient and Modern, with his matchless aphorisms, and his oath of professional fealty and obligation, still a model of all that is high-minded and self-obliterating in him whose life work is the caring for his sick and miserable fellows. It would almost seem that no physician could reach his best development who has not at some time come under the spell of the people and the art and the literature that bred Hippocrates, and who cannot with these as part of his experience say of himself, as Tennyson makes Ulysses say: "I am a part of all that I have met."







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