

THE VALUE OF THE CLASSICS IN MODERN EDUCATION

By Charles P. Steinmetz, A.M., Ph. D.

Chief Consulting Engineer Gen. Elec. Co.

The study of the Classic Languages Greek and Latin, including the literature written in these languages, and the history of the Ancient times, has been the foundation of all educations since the first awakening of the German races in the early middle ages, until a few generations ago.

During the middle of last century, the tendency made itself felt, of reducing, and finally entirely eliminating the classics from modern education, in favor of "more utilitarian" subjects, of science, modern languages etc. The flood tide of this tendency has just passed, and it is beginning to be realized, that the result of the narrow utilitarian training has been a failure: very few of the professional men, and business men of this training have reached prominence in scientific and national life, and the urgent need of a return to a broader education is becoming more realized from year to year

Ours is an age of science and engineering, of industrial development and progress. The unfettering of the forces of human initiative and ability by the French revolution at the end of the 18th century, the opening up of the vast resources of our Continent, gave opportunities never existing before, and impatiently the youth chafed against wasting time in education, instead of "doing things" by grasping the opportunities. Fortunately for the intellectual progress of the race, these opportunities are gone, and intelligence and knowledge again are replacing chance and grasping. That means, education becomes the essential requirement in determining success in life.

Education is not the learning of a trade or profession, but is the development of the intellect and the broadening of the mind, afforded by a general knowledge of all the subjects of interest to the human race, as required to enable a man to attack intelligently and solve problems in which no previous detail experience guides, and to decide the questions arising in his intellectual, social, and industrial life by impartially weighing the different factors and judge their relative importance. These problems, and thus the educational preparation required to cope with them, are practically the same in all walks of life, and the general education of mind and intellect, required by the engineer, the lawyer, the physician, etc., thus is essentially the same.

The only legitimate differences in the preparation for the life's work, required by the different professions, thus are those pertaining to the specific instruction and study of the details of the particular branch of human knowledge, by which the student desires to make his living.

The amount of human knowledge has grown so vast, that no single mind can ever master it all. That means, we must limit ourselves to a part, usually even a small part of human knowledge, must specialize, and ours thus has been called an age of specialists. It must be realized however, that the value of the specialist in the social organism is in direct proportion to the general knowledge which he possesses. Special knowledge, no matter how extensive and intensive, is of very little value, if not intelligently directed and applied. This requires broadness of view and common sense, which only a broad and general education can give, but which no special training supplies, but such special training rather tends to narrow the view and incapacitate the man from taking his proper position as useful member of society. Examples of this we can see all around us, especially in the business man, the lawyer and more still in the engineer for the reason that the avocation of an engineer is specially liable to make the man one sided. By dealing exclusively with empirical science and its applications, the engineer is led to forget, or never to realize,

that there are other branches of human thought besides empirical science, and equally important as factors of a broad general education and intellectual development. An introduction to these other fields is best and quickest given by the study of the classics, which opens to the student other worlds entirely different from our present, the world of art and literature, of Hellas, and the world of organization and administration - and of citizenship - of Rome, and so broadens his horizon beyond anything which can be accomplished otherwise, and shows relative values more in their proper proportion, and not distorted by the trend of thought of his time.

There have always been educated and uneducated, skilled and unskilled workers. But with the development of modern industrialism a third class has arisen between the skilled and the unskilled, the educated and the uneducated: men trained to do one thing only, but do this very well and efficiently. We call them piece workers, when working for wages in the factory; specialists, when receiving salaries as professional men. They are tools, useful when directed by somebody's intelligence, but useless to themselves and to the world otherwise. The product of many of our engineering schools, business colleges, etc., is of this character. Some of these men may become intelligent and educated human beings and useful members of society afterwards, it is true, by life's educational efforts, but their schooling did not make them such.

A skilled mechanic may finally specialize in one class of work: but that does not make him an unskilled piece worker. An engineer, physician or other professional man may devote his time to one branch of his profession, but as long as he keeps up his interest and his familiarity with his entire profession, and with all the problems of the work surrounding him, he has not yet deteriorated into a specialist.

The greatest problem before the educational world of today is, how to broaden the education, to counter-act the narrowing tendency of modern life and modern industrialism, to produce that intellectual development and broadening of the mind which produces not mere intellectual machines, but citizens of the republic capable of taking their proper place in the industrial and social life of the nation, men who can be trusted to direct the destinies of the republic during the stormy times of industrial and social re-organization which are before us-

Modern society is dominated by industrialism, the out-growth of applied science, that is, engineering. The entire world has been unified, and whether we travel through the European countries, or see the new civilizations of the far East, we find no material differences from the intellectual and social conceptions of our country. Thus the broadening effect of the study of other nations and countries has largely vanished.

Wherever we go, we meet similar conditions, the same scientific and religious beliefs, the same organization of society and we are very liable to draw the conclusion, that our conditions, our beliefs our form of society are the best and the only feasible ones and civilization could not exist without them, but any radical change would be destructive to civilization. But self satisfaction means stagnation, and stagnation means decay, and herein consists the foremost danger of our civilization.

The remedy herefor is the knowledge and familiarity with another civilization, different from ours in character, superior in some respects, inferior in others.

Nobody familiar with Hellas in its prime can ever believe that the highest development of art, science and literature, which the world has seen, can not exist in the freest form of democracy - a democracy as free and unrestrained as to be almost anarchism. Nobody familiar with the Alexanderian period can deny that science can flourish under an autocratic monarchy. A purely communistic nation has held the hegemony of Hellas for centuries. For centuries the centralized federal government of Rome has maintained the peace and guarded the civilization of the entire civilized world, and many countries have under Rome's dominion enjoyed a civilization, which they have never reached before nor after.

It is this difference of the ancient civilizations, into which the classics introduce us, from the present conditions, which make their study of importance and almost of necessity to day, more than ever before, to counter-act the equalizing and leveling tendency on the human mind, exerted by present day conditions, and to give the broadening effect on the intellect, which is the most important object of education.

The modern languages are not in the same class with the classic languages, as they open to the student no new world, no field of thought appreciably different from our own, and I therefore consider them as of little educational value. They have some utilitarian value for the small minority of people, who travel into foreign countries, and also by enabling us to use scientific, engineering and other publications in a foreign language in those cases, where these publications have not been translated. However, their study is so much easier and more expeditious by conversational methods outside or before the higher schools, that they hardly find a proper place in the curriculum of higher educational institutions.

The study of the classics involves that of the language, the literature, and the history of ancient times. It has been claimed that practically the same benefit, from familiarity with a

world different from our own, can be derived by studying the classic literature from good translations. This is not so. It is impossible to get into the spirit, the atmosphere of a time and its literature, the understanding of its history, without knowing the language. It may not be necessary, not feasible in many cases, to become so familiar with the language as to read fluently all the literature written in it, and translations then may find their use. It must be realized that a translation means something very different to the one who is familiar with the history, and somewhat familiar with the language, as it does to one to whom language, history etc. are entirely strange.

There also is a considerable utilitarian value in the classic languages, as the terminology of science is entirely based on Latin forms with Greek and Latin roots, and while the student may memorize the terms of his profession, it is difficult, if not impracticable to memorize all the terms of science with which an educated man must be familiar as those of medicine, botany, mineralogy, etc. This however becomes easy to the student of the classic languages, to whom these terms have a meaning. To eliminate the scientific terms of objects from the language is obviously impossible, as the common or English names usually are different in different localities, if they exist at all, and thereby indefinite.



However, this I rather consider as of secondary moment.

Very greatly needed in the re-introduction of the classics into the school curriculum of every educated man appears to me the human side of the teaching of the classics, which would bring the classic ideas into relation with modern life. I believe, often the methods of their teaching are not the most efficient, and especially the classic literature with which the student is familiarized, is not selected so as to offer the greatest educational value in broadening the student's view, nor so as to attract and retain his interest as much as possible.

Thus in Latin the story of war and conquest, of the victory of military organization over mere bravery, in *Caesaris de bello Gallico*, is interesting and instructive, while the Civil war is of less interest. Even to-day *Cicero's de officiis* is well worth reading.

In Latin poetry selections from *Ovidii Metamorphoses* are easy reading, and are a valuable introduction to the classic metre, and interesting in the parallelism of the myths of the classic world with those of other races (the flood etc.), but it is hard to understand the retention of the uninteresting plagiarism of the courtier Virgil in the curriculum, while the most important, in his educational value, and most interesting poet, Horace, is often neglected. Of all Roman writers, Horace, probably exerts the most broadening influence on the intellect

when read under an intelligent instructor; the change from the distortion in which the relative values of persons and things appear to their contemporaries, to the proper proportion in the perspective history, probably is nowhere so sharply demonstrated as in the relation between the "libertino patre natus" and his "Protector" and "patron" Maecenas, whose name has escaped oblivion merely by his favorite's favor.

In Greek prose, Xenophon's Anabasis is interesting and instructive in many respects, and may well be followed by the student with maps of the country traversed by the ten thousand. Selections from Lucian possibly are the nearest approach to Horace. The Greek drama probably is beyond the scope of reading which can be attempted in a general college course, but the easy dialect of the kione is within the reach of the student, and at least a part of the new testament may be read in the original and its value can hardly be overestimated in showing the meaningless nature of theological controversies on words of an imperfect translation. The greatest work of the literature of Hellas however is Homer; and here again in many American schools the Iliad only is read, while the far more interesting Odyssey is slighted, though the latter with its tales of travel and adventure, with giants and monsters, should especially appeal to the American Boy, and is of far greater interest and educational value in its minute description of everyday life at the early dawn of human history, in its pictorial expressions of times and occupations, of the time of the day, the coming of night, the dawn, etc.