

IV  
OUR ENGLISH SYLLABUS

'I do not like her name.'  
'There was no thought of pleasing you when  
she was christened.'

SHAKESPEARE

*Read to the English Society at Oxford*



## OUR ENGLISH SYLLABUS

SCHOOLMASTERS in our time are fighting hard in defence of education against vocational training; universities, on the other hand, are fighting against education on behalf of learning.

Let me explain. The purpose of education has been described by Milton as that of fitting a man 'to perform justly, skilfully, and magnanimously all the offices both private and public, of peace and war'. Provided we do not overstress 'skilfully' Aristotle would substantially agree with this, but would add the conception that it should also be a preparation for leisure, which according to him is the end of all human activity. 'We wage war in order to have peace; we work in order to have leisure.' Neither of them would dispute that the purpose of education is to produce the good man and the good citizen, though it must be remembered that we are not here using the word 'good' in any narrowly ethical sense. The 'good man' here means the man of good taste and good feeling, the interesting and interested man, and almost the happy man. With such an end in view education in most civilized communities has taken much the same path; it has taught civil behaviour by direct and indirect discipline, has awakened the logical faculty by mathematics or dialectic, and has endeavoured to produce right sentiments—which are to the passions what right habits are to the body—by steeping the pupil in the literature both sacred and profane on which the culture of the community is based. Vocational training, on the other



hand, prepares the pupil not for leisure, but for work; it aims at making not a good man but a good banker, a good electrician, a good scavenger, or a good surgeon. You see at once that education is essentially for freemen and vocational training for slaves. That is how they were distributed in the old unequal societies; the poor man's son was apprenticed to a trade, the rich man's son went to Eton and Oxford and then made the grand tour. When societies become, in effort if not in achievement, egalitarian, we are presented with a difficulty. To give every one education and to give no one vocational training is impossible, for electricians and surgeons we must have and they must be trained. Our ideal must be to find time for both education and training: our danger is that equality may mean training for all and education for none—that every one will learn commercial French instead of Latin, book-keeping instead of geometry, and 'knowledge of the world we live in' instead of great literature. It is against this danger that schoolmasters have to fight, for if education is beaten by training, civilization dies. That is a thing very likely to happen. One of the most dangerous errors instilled into us by nineteenth-century progressive optimism is the idea that civilization is automatically bound to increase and spread. The lesson of history is the opposite; civilization is a rarity, attained with difficulty and easily lost. The normal state of humanity is barbarism, just as the normal surface of our planet is salt water. Land looms large in our imagination of the planet and civilization in our history books, only because sea and savagery are,

to us, less interesting. And if you press to know what I mean by civilization, I reply 'Humanity', by which I do not mean kindness so much as the realization of the human idea. Human life means to me the life of beings for whom the leisured activities of thought, art, literature, conversation are the end,<sup>1</sup> and the preservation and propagation of life merely the means. That is why education seems to me so important: it actualizes that potentiality for leisure, if you like for amateurishness, which is man's prerogative. You have noticed, I hope, that man is the only amateur animal; all the others are professionals. They have no leisure and do not desire it. When the cow has finished eating she chews the cud; when she has finished chewing she sleeps; when she has finished sleeping she eats again. She is a machine for turning grass into calves and milk—in other words, for producing more cows. The lion cannot stop hunting, nor the beaver building dams, nor the bee making honey. When God made the beasts dumb He saved the world from infinite boredom, for if they could speak they would all of them, all day, talk nothing but shop.

That is my idea of education. You see at once that it implies an immense superiority on the part of the teacher. He is trying to make the pupil a good man, in the sense I have described. The assumption is that the master is already human, the pupil a mere candidate for humanity—an unregenerate little bundle of

<sup>1</sup> The natural end. It would have been out of place here to say what I believe about Man's supernatural end or to explain why I think the natural end should be pursued although, in isolation from the supernatural, it cannot be fully realized.



appetites which is to be kneaded and moulded into human shape by one who knows better. In education the master is the agent, the pupil, the patient.

Now learning, considered in itself, has, on my view, no connexion at all with education. It is an activity for men—that is for beings who have already been humanized by this kneading and moulding process. Among these men—these biologically simian animals who have been made into men—there are some who desire to know. Or rather, all desire to know, but some desire it more fervently than the majority and are ready to make greater sacrifices for it. The things they want to know may be quite different. One may want to know what happened a million years ago, another, what happens a million light-years away, a third, what is happening in his own table on the microscopic level. What is common to them all is the thirst for knowledge. Now it might have happened that such people were left in civil societies to gratify their taste as best they could without assistance or interference from their fellows. It has not happened. Such societies have usually held a belief—and it is a belief of a quite transcendental nature—that knowledge is the natural food of the human mind: that those who specially pursue it are being specially human; and that their activity is good in itself besides being always honourable and sometimes useful to the whole society. Hence we come to have such associations as universities—institutions for the support and encouragement of men devoted to learning.

You have doubtless been told—but it can hardly be repeated too often—that our colleges at Oxford

were founded not in order to teach the young but in order to support masters of arts. In their original institution they are homes not for teaching but for the pursuit of knowledge; and their original nature is witnessed by the brute fact that hardly any college in Oxford is financially dependent on the undergraduates' fees, and that most colleges are content if they do not lose over the undergraduate. A school without pupils would cease to be school; a college without undergraduates would be as much a college as ever, would perhaps be more a college.

It follows that the university student is essentially a different person from the school pupil. He is not a candidate for humanity, he is, in theory, already human. He is not a patient; nor is his tutor an operator who is doing something to him. The student is, or ought to be, a young man who is already beginning to follow learning for its own sake, and who attaches himself to an older student, not precisely to be taught, but to pick up what he can. From the very beginning the two ought to be fellow students. And that means they ought not to be thinking about each other but about the subject. The schoolmaster must think about the pupil: everything he says is said to improve the boy's character or open his mind—the schoolmaster is there to make the pupil a 'good' man. And the pupil must think about the master. Obedience is one of the virtues he has come to him to learn; his motive for reading one book and neglecting another must constantly be that he was told to. But the elder student has no such duties *ex officio* to the younger. His business is to pursue knowledge. If his



pursuit happens to be helpful to the junior partner, he is welcome to be present; if not, he is welcome to stay at home. No doubt the elder, of his charity, may go a little out of his course to help the younger; but he is then acting as a man, not as a student.

Such is the ideal. In fact, of course, Oxford has become in modern times very largely a place of teaching. I spend most of the term teaching and my tutorial stipend is a part of my income no less important than my fellowship. Most of you, perhaps, have come here with the idea of completing your education rather than with the idea of entering a society devoted to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. What do these changes mean? They mean, I think, that a temporary immersion in the life of learning has been found to have an educational value. Learning is not education; but it can be used educationally by those who do not propose to pursue learning all their lives. There is nothing odd in the existence of such a by-product. Games are essentially for pleasure, but they happen to produce health. They are not likely, however, to produce health if they are played for the sake of it. Play to win and you will find yourself taking violent exercise; play because it is good for you and you will not. In the same way, though you may have come here only to be educated, you will never receive that precise educational gift which a university has to give you unless you can at least *pretend*, so long as you are with us, that you are concerned not with education but with knowledge for its own sake. And we, on our part, can do very little for you if we aim directly at your education. We assume that you are

already human, already good men; that you have the specifically human virtues and above all the great virtue of curiosity. We are not going to try to improve you; we have fulfilled our whole function if we help you to *see* some given tract of reality.

I dare say some of you are wondering by now what all this has to do with the English syllabus. I am just coming to that. From what I have said, it follows that on my view a freshman hesitating over the choice of a Final School is quite on the wrong track if he is asking himself, 'Which gives me the best general education?' He may be compelled to ask, 'Which qualifies me for the best jobs when I go down?' for unfortunately we have to make our livings. The necessity which thus limits his choice is, as it were, an external necessity: poverty will prevent one man from becoming an astronomer as blindness may prevent another from becoming a painter. But to ask for the best 'general education' is to ask for one's schooldays over again. The proper question for a freshman is not 'What will do me most good?' but 'What do I most want to know?' For nothing that we have to offer will do him good unless he can be persuaded to forget all about self-improvement for three or four years, and to absorb himself in getting to know some part of reality, as it is in itself.

The qualification 'as it is in itself' is here important. At first sight it might seem that since the student cannot study everything he should at least study a bit of everything; that the best Final Honour School would have a composite syllabus—a little philosophy, a little politics, a little economics, a little science, a



little literature. There are many objections to such a discipline, but I will mention that one only which is central to my argument. The composite school, as its very name implies, has been composed by some one. Those little bits of various subjects are not found lying together in those quantities and in that order which the syllabus shows. They have been put together in that way artificially by a committee of professors. That committee cannot have been following the grain and joint of reality as reality discovers itself to those actually engaged in the pursuit of learning. For the life of learning knows nothing of this nicely balanced encyclopaedic arrangement. Every one of the suggested subjects is infinite and, in its own way, covers the whole field of reality. The committee would in fact be guided by their idea of what would do the students good—that is, by a purely educational idea. In reading such a school, therefore, you would not be turned loose on some tract of reality as it is, to make what you could of it; you would be getting selections of reality selected by your elders—something cooked, expurgated, filtered, and generally toned down for your edification. You would still be in the leading strings and might as well have stayed at school. Your whole reading in its scope and proportions would bear the impress neither of reality nor of your own mind but of the mind of the committee. The educational ideals of a particular age, class, and philosophy of life would be stamped on your whole career.

The objection will naturally be clearest to us if we consider how the subject we know best would fare in

such a school. There would be a little bit of literature. What would it consist of? Obviously, of great works, for we should have to make up in quality what we lacked in quantity. Perhaps a few great 'classics' each from French, German, and English. As a curriculum for a schoolboy, nothing could be more liberal and edifying. But you see at once that it has very little to do with a knowledge of literature as it really grows and works, with all its ups and downs, in any actual country. It may train your mind and make you in the Aristotelian sense a better man; but are you not old enough now to cease being trained? Is it not time for you to venture to look on reality in the raw?

If this objection to the composite school is accepted, we may summarily reject certain proposals for the reform of the English School. When people ask, 'Why not a little philosophy?' 'Why not Italian literature?' 'Why not some psychology?', they are usually hankering after the composite school. But they may have better motives than that. They may want philosophy and Italian not because these are educational but because English writers have in fact been influenced by philosophical speculation and by Italian literature—because these things, in fact, *are* parts of the piece of reality we have set out to study.

They are quite right. So is the history of the Romance and Germanic languages from the earliest times, the history of all the literatures that have affected us, the history, political, social, and economic, of all Europe, and even the flora, fauna, and geology of Great Britain. A perfect study of English would



involve all this; nay, as Hegel saw, a perfect study of anything requires a knowledge of everything. But

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne

forces us to be content with less, and you, who are with us for only four years, to be content with less still. Thus I admit that some limitation is necessary; the whole literary reality cannot be embraced by any Final Honour School. But there is a difference between arbitrary selection and a curtailment which obediently follows the joints of the real as they are, not as we choose to pretend they are. Thus if a man has not time to learn the geography of the world, we might teach him that of Great Britain, a land mass given to us by nature. There are facts about England which he would be unable to understand because he did not know Europe; we should have to put up with that. The other, the arbitrary, alternative would be to give him selected high lights from all over the planet—the Grand Canyon, the Rhine, a glimpse of a South American forest, the Bay of Biscay, and the Gobi Desert. The first would give him a real though limited knowledge of nature—would teach him how one country smelled, looked, lived, and died. But the second might make him a mere globe trotter.

In this spirit then, we approach our vast subject of English literature, admitting that we cannot study it whole, but determined to neglect outlying provinces and remote connexions rather than to break up the central unity. The first thing to do, obviously, is to cut off some years from this end. The reasons for choosing this end are, I suppose, obvious. In the first

place, we naturally wish to help the students in studying those parts of the subject where we have most help to give and they need help most. On recent and contemporary literature their need is least and our help least. They ought to understand it better than we, and if they do not then there is something radically wrong either with them or with the literature. But I need not labour the point. There is an intrinsic absurdity in making current literature a subject of academic study, and the student who wants a tutor's assistance in reading the works of his own contemporaries might as well ask for a nurse's assistance in blowing his own nose. Again, things are understood by what precedes them rather than by what follows them. It may be disappointing to stop a story in the middle, but you can understand it as far as you have gone; you cannot understand it if you *begin* in the middle. I can indeed imagine a man denying this and maintaining that the nineteenth century can be understood only in the light of the twentieth. But if that is so, then the twentieth can be understood only in the light of the twenty-first and all succeeding centuries. We are therefore doomed to an equal misunderstanding wherever we stop, and may just as well stop where we find it convenient.

We begin then by cutting off a hundred, or two hundred, or any reasonable number of years from this end, and still we have too much left. If we picture our subject as a tree we have first of all the soil in which it grows: that is, the history of the English people, social, economic, and intellectual. I imagine that neither you nor I wish to draw attention to this;



for if you look in the statutes you will find that examiners are at liberty to set questions on it, and it is always possible that if we talk much about it they may wake up and really do so. Let us keep quiet about the soil, and go on to the roots. The great central tap-root is old Germanic developing, as we pass above the ground-level, into Old English. A second root, not quite so big and important as this, is Old French. A third, noticeably smaller, strikes farther away into Latin. But all these are pretty tough and more or less essential to the tree. Then come the little ones—the tiny, much advertised, and attractive Greek root, the modern Spanish, modern Italian, modern French, German, &c. Our problem is to find which of these we can neglect with least violence to the nature of the tree.

Well—the little ones must go. We have not time, in four years, for Greek, Spanish, Italian, French, and German. If one could be saved, it would have to be modern French. Of course if we were considering which is the most interesting in itself I should unhesitatingly choose the Greek; but that would be to fall back from naturalism to arbitrary selection, from learning to education. Certainly Greek literature is better than French; but certainly English and French lie together in reality as English and Greek do not. But even French we can hardly save, for we have the three great roots to consider. The tap-root, Anglo-Saxon, can never be abandoned. The man who does not know it remains all his life a child among real English students. There we find the speech-rhythms that we use every day made the basis of metre; there

we find the origins of that romanticism for which the ignorant invent such odd explanations. This is our own stuff and its life is in every branch of the tree to the remotest twigs. That we cannot abandon. Old French and Latin we have reluctantly given up: if you want them, I am the last man to deny you.

With these limitations, then, we hand you over our tract of reality. Do not be deceived by talk about the narrowness of the specialist. The opposite of the specialist, as you now see, is the student enslaved to some one else's selection. In the great rough countryside which we throw open to you, you can choose your own path. Here's your gun, your spade, your fishing-tackle; go and get yourself a dinner. Do not tell me that you would sooner have a nice composite *menu* of dishes from half the world drawn up for you. You are too old for that. It is time you learned to wrestle with nature for yourself. And whom will you trust to draw up the *menu*? How do you know that in that very river which I would exclude as poisonous the fish you specially want, the undiscovered fish, is waiting? And you would never find it if you let us select. *Our* selection would be an effort to bind the future within *our* present knowledge and taste: nothing more could come out than we had put in. It would be worse; it would be a kind of propaganda, concealed, unconscious, and omnipotent. Is it really true that you would prefer that to the run of your teeth over the whole country? Have you no incredulity, no scepticism, left?