

MACAULAY'S CLASSICAL READING

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There is perhaps no English author whose classical scholarship is above reproach, from Shakespeare and Milton to Pater and Stevenson. Even the learned Macaulay, because his translations were bald, tried three times before he was elected Fellow at Cambridge;¹ only, later, to base his *Lays of Ancient Rome* on a misconception, thanks to insufficient knowledge on his part of early Latin literature.² Yet who would sacrifice the *Lays* for a dissertation on the absence of evidence for supposing that the Romans wrote ballad poetry, or forego Macaulay's comments on his classical reading for the thesis that the literary study of the classics is subversive of true scholarship?

According to his nephew and biographer, George Otto Trevelyan, Macaulay was a modest man, and he was alive to defects in himself academically, especially in mathematics. The result, however, was that he was put on his mettle. He did not, like Peacock, disparage the universities and rate his scholarship as equal to theirs, but he read and re-read the classics through life, until, by the longest way round, but the shortest way home, for him, he arrived at an appreciation of Greek and Latin writers that was vital, sound, and his own. Indeed, the time came when, to his great satisfaction, he received university recognition as a scholar; for "an emendation of his, on an obscure passage in Euripides, was favorably regarded in the Trinity combination room."³

In the matter of keeping up his classics after college he resembled FitzGerald. But FitzGerald dreamed over books. Macaulay dreamed over them, too, but oftener he battled with them.⁴ He

¹ G. Otto Trevelyan, *Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay*, I, 87.

² P. C. Parr, Introduction to *The Lays of Ancient Rome*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1911.

³ Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, II, 361.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 380.

penciled his reaction over all the margins. Trevelyan says that to separate the commentary from the text in these cases is to be unjust to Macaulay's reputation.¹ In this warlike attitude he reminds one constantly of Landor, the more so because he had something of Landor's difficulty in appreciating Plato. He does not mention Landor, however, nor read Carlyle. Scott is his idol among authors of his own generation, and Scott died when Macaulay was thirty-two.

In his *Essays* Macaulay shows himself interested in, and often severely critical of, the classical scholarship of great statesmen and writers. He declares that more of Petrarch's Latin works "would have placed him on a level with Vida or Buchanan."² As modern Latin poets he places Milton and Buchanan on a par,³ but he admits that in his prose Milton uses words "that would have made Quintilian stare and gasp."⁴ He attacks Sir William Temple for presuming to write his *Essay on Ancient and Modern Learning* when he knew no Greek.⁵ He criticizes Addison for confining his attention almost entirely to Latin poetry to the neglect of Latin prose and Greek.⁶ He declares that Dr. Johnson's Latin writings are tainted by his wide knowledge of mediaeval writers.⁷ "That Augustan delicacy of taste which is the boast of the great public schools of England, Johnson never possessed," says he.⁸ He praises Pitt for his classical scholarship; adding, "He was not satisfied until he had mastered Lycophron's *Cassandra*, the most obscure work in the whole range of ancient literature."⁹

In 1824 Macaulay contributed a paper "On the Athenian Orators" to *Knight's Quarterly Magazine*. In it he eulogizes

¹ *Ibid.*, 393.

³ Addison (1843).

² *Criticisms of the Principal Italian Writers* (1824).

⁴ Milton (1825).

⁵ *Sir William Temple* (1838). See this essay and that on Atterbury for two long passages on the Phalaris controversy.

⁶ Addison (1843).

⁷ *Samuel Johnson* (1856).

⁸ In 1837 (Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, I, 407) Macaulay read some patristic Greek, and praised portions of it, to the discredit of mediaeval Latin. To the virtues of the latter he remained resolutely blind, thereby satisfying an academic ideal of his day. He read St. Augustine's *Confessions*, "a book not without interest, but he expresses himself in the style of a field-preacher."

⁹ *William Pitt* (1859).

Aristotle, expounds Quintilian, attacks Johnson, and concludes with an apology for failing to take up the Orators. But he does something more valuable for our purposes here. He sets forth his theory that the classics should be read, not dissected, and read as literature.

In spite of his wide knowledge of Latin, Macaulay was at one with the nineteenth century in its preference for Greek. He congratulated himself, moreover, that he could return to Greek as a mature man (letter to Ellis, Calcutta, February 8, 1835). In the same letter to Ellis he tells how he was enraptured with Italian and little less pleased with Spanish. "But when I went back to the Greek," he says, "I felt as if I had never known before what intellectual enjoyment was."

To Macaulay, Homer was "an old ballad-maker who died near three thousand years ago" (Journal, August 19, 1851). "I admire him more than ever," he writes to Ellis, August 21, 1851; "but I am now quite sure that the *Iliad* is a piece of mosaic, made very skilfully long after his time out of several of his lays, with bits here and there of the compositions of inferior minstrels." In 1851 he writes to his niece Margaret in eulogy of Homer's genius. Homer usually "moved him to tears." On the voyage to India he enjoyed the *Odyssey* more than the *Iliad*.

In a letter to Trevelyan, August 1, 1853, six years before his death, Macaulay gives his canon of the "first-rate Athenians," denying Euripides, Xenophon, Socrates, and Aeschines a place in the list. They are Demosthenes, Thucydides, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristophanes, and Plato. "I can certainly add nobody else to the six," he says.¹

Aeschylus was to Macaulay the supreme tragedian, Demosthenes the unrivaled orator, Thucydides the ideal historian. Euripides grew to share his affection for Sophocles. Aristophanes distressed him with his lapses from good taste.

Of course he read Aristotle. Plato came to him slowly, but he persevered. Plato's metaphysics and politics did not interest him, but the wit, the humor, the settings, and the poetry of the *Dialogues*

¹ "I have read Pindar with less pleasure than I feel in reading the great Attic poets, but still with admiration," he writes to Ellis, February 8, 1835.

filled him with delight. He disliked Socrates; called him a busy-body; did not wonder they poisoned him, and said he should never have forgiven him himself. Yet after questioning Socrates' reasoning and methods to the last, he writes on the *Crito*: "When we consider the moral state of Greece in his time, and the revolution which he produced in men's notions of good and evil, we must pronounce him one of the greatest men that ever lived."

He read Demosthenes with "interest and admiration indescribable."¹ In *Sir James Mackintosh's History of the Revolution* (1835), he characterizes Demosthenes' and Fox's oratory as "reason penetrated, and if we may venture on the expression, made red hot by passion." In his slashing review of Milford's *History of Greece* (1824) he composes a fiery defense of his hero's character and political ideals.

Of Thucydides he writes to Ellis, August 25, 1835: "But what are they all [the Roman historians, in this case] to the great Athenian? I do assure you there is no prose composition in the world, not even the *De Corona*, which I place so high as the seventh book of Thucydides. It is the *ne plus ultra* of human art." "A young man," he wrote in February of the same year, "whatever his genius may be, is no judge of such a writer as Thucydides. I had no high opinion of him ten years ago. I have now been reading him with a mind accustomed to historical researches and to political affairs, and I am astounded at my former blindness, and at his greatness." In 1836 he says, "Thucydides is the greatest historian that ever lived."² On November 29, 1848, he writes, "I found copies of my *History* on my table. . . . I read my book, and Thucydides', which, I am sorry to say, I found much better than mine."

But Macaulay did not neglect other Greek orators and historians. In his essay on *History* (1828) he praises Herodotus for simple, and Thucydides for artistic, narration. On November 20, 1848, he writes, "I never went through Herodotus at such a pace before. He is an admirable artist in many respects; but undoubtedly his arrangement is faulty." In *History* again, he is impatient of the Puritanism of Xenophon, "who came in only for the milk with which Socrates nourished his babes in philosophy."

¹ Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, I, 394, 400.

² *Ibid.*, 409.

He calls the *Anabasis*, however, "one of the very first works that antiquity has left us: perfect in its kind";¹ and in his review of Mitford's *History of Greece* mentions Xenophon in the same breath with Thucydides, in contrast to "the extravagant representations of Plutarch, Diodorus, Curtius, and other romancers of the same class." In *History* he attacks Plutarch² further for his inaccuracy and false interpretation and praises the facts of Arrian and Polybius; showing, however, that they were "thrown into the shade" by better story-tellers—by Livy and Quintus Curtius. He read Aelian.³ "I have finished Diodorus Siculus at last," he writes to Ellis, November 30, 1836, "after dawdling over him at odd times since last March. He is a stupid, credulous, prosing old ass; yet I heartily wish we had a great deal more of him." In his Mitford's *History of Greece*, Macaulay is scornful of Aeschines. In 1855 Photius sends him back to Isocrates and Lysias.⁴ Of Lysias he says, "I read with the greatest delight some of those incomparable speeches; incomparable, I mean, in their kind, which is not the highest kind. They are wonderful—Scarlett speaking in the style of Addison."

In a letter to Ellis, February 8, 1835, he quotes from Hesiod, and on December 30 of the same year he writes with enthusiasm of Lucian. "I am now deep in Aristophanes and Lucian. Of Aristophanes I think as I always thought; but Lucian has agreeably surprised me. At school I read some of his *Dialogues of the Dead* when I was thirteen; and, to my shame, I never, to the best of my belief, read a line of him since. I am charmed with him. His style seems to me to be superior to any extant writer who lived later than the age of Demosthenes and Theophrastus. He has a most peculiar and delicate vein of humor. It is not the humor of Aristophanes; it is not that of Plato; and yet it is akin to both; not quite equal, I admit, to either, but still exceedingly charming.

¹ Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, I, 410.

² Macaulay pays Plutarch a compliment, however, in connection with Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, in which, along with Shakespeare's other Roman dramas, he was especially interested (Trevelyan, *Marginal Notes of Lord Macaulay*, pp. 34-35). He says, "The last scenes are huddled up, and affect me less than Plutarch's narrative."

³ Trevelyan, *Life and Letters*, II, 390.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 324-25.

I hardly know where to find an instance of a writer, in the decline of a literature, who has shown an invention so rich and a taste so pure."

He read Theocritus three times. "I like him better than ever," he says after the third reading.¹ Below the Twelfth Idyl, however, he writes,² "A fine poem on an odious subject"; and at the end of the third, "A pretty little poem; but it is inferior to Virgil's second Eclogue, in spite of the great inferiority of Virgil's subject." He finds the Seventh Idyl superior to Virgil, however.³ His copies of Moschus and Macrobius are mentioned by Trevelyan in the *Life and Letters*, I, 404. He read Apollonius Rhodius and Callimachus, according to his letters to Ellis, December 30, 1835. Of Athenaeus he writes to Ellis, August 25, 1835, "Did you ever read Athenaeus through? I never did, but I am meditating an attack on him. The multitude of quotations looks very tempting; and I never open him for a minute without being paid for my trouble." "I turned over Philo," he writes,⁴ "and compared his narrative with Josephus. It is amusing to observe with what skill those Jews, trained in Greek learning, exhibited the philosophical side of their religion to Pagan scholars and statesmen, and kept out of sight the ceremonial part." Finally he was acquainted with the Greek romances. He says Longus "is prodigiously absurd; but there is often an exquisite prettiness in the style." He calls Xenophon the Ephesian's *Ephesiaca* "the basest thing to be found in Greek." Achilles Tatius is "detestable trash." The Aethiopicus of Heliodorus he pronounces "the best of the Greek romances, which is not saying much for it."

Macaulay committed most of Catullus to memory. "The only Latin poets whose writings exhibit much vigor of imagination are Lucretius and Catullus," he says in *John Dryden* (1828). He read Lucretius for his "knowledge of life and manners, sense of beauty of the external world, and elevation and dignity of moral feeling," rather than for his philosophy. Yet he remarks elsewhere, "I love a little of the Epicurean element in virtue." Like Horace he

¹ *Ibid.*, I, 401.

³ *Marginal Notes of Lord Macaulay*, p. 10.

² *Ibid.*, II, 304.

⁴ Trevelyan, *Life and Letters*, II, 390.

drew his philosophy from both systems. "This sort of philosophy, an odd sort of cross between Stoicism and Epicureanism, I have learned, where most people unlearn all their philosophy—in crowded senates and fine drawing-rooms," he writes to Hannah M. Macaulay, July 14, 183?. Horace charmed him, but he could not see how Horace waxed enthusiastic over Pindar and failed to appreciate Aeschylus. At his dressing-table in the morning Macaulay learned choice epigrams from Martial. But Martial's indecency, servility, and mendacity disgusted him.

Few scholars of his day understood Cicero as the statesman-essayist-letter-writer-orator-historian Macaulay did. He neither rationalized him till he made a hero of him, nor consigned him to Hades because he was an egotist, a weakling, and a turncoat. He saw every side of Cicero—orator, rhetorician, statesman, and thinker. Cicero was as living, as vivid to him as his contemporaries—more so than many of them. Trevelyan has shown all this with scholarly thoroughness in his *Life and Letters* and in his *Marginal Notes of Lord Macaulay*.

Macaulay was no professional romanticist: his literary conservatism was shown in 1857, when he attacked pre-Raphaelitism. But he came to prefer the romantic in Virgil to the classical; the unfinished to the finished. "The last six books which Virgil had not fully corrected pleased me better than the first six," he writes to Ellis, July 1, 1834. "I like him best on Italian ground. I like his localities; his national enthusiasm; his frequent allusions to his country, its history, its antiquities, and its greatness. In this respect he often reminded me of Sir Walter Scott, with whom, in the general character of his mind, he had very little affinity. The *Georgics* pleased me better; the *Eclogues* best—the second and tenth above all."

Macaulay pitied, despised, and liked Ovid. "It is curious," said he "that the three most celebrated Roman writers who were banished, and whose compositions written in exile have come down to us—Cicero, Seneca, and Ovid—have all shown an impatience and pusillanimity which lower their characters," and "which," observes Trevelyan, "he might have added, are strongly at variance with the proverbial manliness and constancy of the Roman

nature"; yet which, we add to Trevelyan, is not strange at all, for these men were artists, they had "nerves," and they lived in terrible times doubly terrifying to acute imaginations.

He was not enthusiastic over the Plinys, regarded Lucan as "unrivalled among rhetoricians," condemned most of Statius, and found Quintilian excellent. He read the Senecas and saw little to reward him in the Younger. But if he did not care for the Roman tragedian he was enthusiastic over the master of Roman comedy. Like Landor, and unlike Meredith, he preferred Plautus to Terence. He felt little interest in Roman satire, however, except to mention Persius in connection with a translation of Kant¹ and to refer to Juvenal in his essay on *The Comic Dramatists of the Restoration*, chiefly to show that there is immorality in classical writers as well as in Wycherly and Congreve. Indeed, he found immorality in Plato. He deplored these blemishes, however, and was grateful to Demosthenes for a more manly attitude.

He declared Caesar "an admirable writer, worth ten of Sallust." How Caesar lived and moved in Macaulay's imagination is seen in his *Fragments of a Roman Tale*. He grew into a strong admiration for Livy. Ammianus Marcellinus he called "the worst written book in Latin"; Velleius Paterculus "a remarkably good epitomist." The *Augustan History* was mostly "trash"; also Valerius Maximus, Annaeus Florus, Lucius Ampelius, and Aurelius Victor, all of whom he read. But Aulus Gellius won his praise.

As for Tacitus, he proved to Ellis, July 25, 1836, with almost mathematical exactness, that while Thucydides is greater than Tacitus, Tacitus is greater than Xenophon.

A formal summary of Macaulay's classical reading is unnecessary. "The extent of his reading in India, as we know from his correspondence, was prodigious and covered nearly the whole field of Greek and Roman literature," says P. C. Parr in his Introduction to *Macaulay's Lays of Ancient Rome*, p. vii. What he did not read, in Latin, appears to have been the fragments of Andronicus, Naevius, and Ennius; the remains of Lucilius and Sulpicia; the works of Petronius, Fronto, and Apuleius; and the writings of

¹ Trevelyan, *Life and Letters*, II, 214.

early Christian Latinists—Minucius Felix, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Lactantius. In the fourth century he read the *Augustan History* and Ammianus Marcellinus, as we have seen, rather than Ausonius, Claudian, and Prudentius. He mentions Claudian, however, in his *Criticisms of the Principal Italian Writers* (1824), and Prudentius in *Addison* (1843). He read very little modern and mediaeval Latin. Landor's enthusiasm for the Greek elegy and lyric,¹ Wilde's for the *Anthology*,² Jefferies' for Diogenes Laertius,³ and Pater's for the Homeric hymns⁴ and Pausanias are not found in Macaulay. He does not display, again, Meredith's interest in the entire field of Greek comedy.

What, we may well ask in conclusion, was the effect of his classical reading on his own works? In the first place, as we pointed out early in this paper, his classical equipment enabled him to deal critically with the scholarship of the men and movements of which he wrote. Secondly, his real learning made it unnecessary for him to appear learned. He declined to stock his writings with Latin phrases. Thirdly, while his *History of England* and his *Speeches* are remarkably pure of classical references of any kind, yet Thucydides and Demosthenes stand always before him as the ideal orator and the ideal historian. His *Fragments of a Roman Tale* and his *Scenes from "Athenian Revels,"* on the other hand, are pleasant contributions to the classical spirit in English. As for his *Essays*, they show assimilated learning, occasional classical digressions, and evidences of stylistic influence. But the chief value of the classics to Macaulay lay in none of the ordinary matters of literary dependence. The classics existed for him for themselves, as great works of literature, to be read and re-read, enjoyed and commented upon, and shared with his friends.

¹ See the present writer's *Walter Savage Landor and His Relation to the Classical Tradition in Eng. Lit.*, Leland Stanford University, 1912.

² In "To Read or Not to Read," *Pall Mall Gazette*, February 8, 1886.

³ *Field and Hedgerow*, essay on "Nature and Books."

⁴ *Greek Studies*.