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5 Latin Language Study as a Renaissance Puberty Rite

I

The reasons why any particular society follows the educational curriculum which it does follow are always exceedingly complex. Because, in being a preparation for the future, it is inevitably a communication of what is available from past experience, education is always primarily a traffic in this experience and only secondarily a matter of theory. The theories concerning the handling of this experience never quite compass the actuality and totality of the experience itself. They are generally rationalizations, afterthoughts, however valuable or venturesome they may be under certain of their aspects.

This is true of education today, and it was true of education during the Renaissance. To be sure, no one bristled with educational theory more than Renaissance man. He had often very definite ideas as to what should be done to produce the proper sort of courtier or soldier or scholar or even ordinary bourgeois. Yet his theories never quite came to grips with everything in the pedagogical heritage.

Such is the case particularly with the Renaissance teaching of Latin. Depending on how much or how little he was in-

fluenced by the humanist tradition, the Renaissance educator thought of Latin as bringing students into contact with the ancients, whom Erasmus had declared to be the sources of practically all human knowledge. But quite independently of this theory, the Renaissance educator was also compelled to teach Latin because the books in use, contemporary as well as ancient, were books written in Latin or translated into Latin. These included the books on language and literature, on "philosophy" (which meant, besides logic, physics and what we might best style general science, inextricably interwoven with psychology and snatches of metaphysics), books on medicine, law, and theology, not to mention books on military science, botany, alchemy, physiognomy, geography, and on every other more or less learned subject. This unacknowledged reason for teaching Latin—the fact that to establish and maintain contact with academic and scientific thought pupils had to be able to read it, write it, and think in it—in actuality outweighed all other reasons through the Renaissance period.

This fact also made the teaching of Latin inevitably different from the teaching of Greek or Hebrew, although in the upper reaches of humanist theory these two languages were recommended for study at least as urgently as Latin. The humanists' own encomia of Greek and Hebrew, from Erasmus to Ramus and beyond, together with institutions such as the nominally trilingual colleges of Louvain, Salamanca, and Alcalá, attest the existence of this equal theoretical esteem for Greek and Hebrew and of a desire to implement theory. Yet the Renaissance Greek and Hebrew are sorry failures compared to Renaissance Latin. They produce no perceptible literature at all. When someone in Western Europe, such as Poliziano, writes epigrams in Greek, this achievement—or,

perhaps better, this tour de force—is completely overshadowed by the bulk of the same author's Latin writings. And the currency of Hebrew, outside specifically Jewish circles, never even remotely approximated the extremely limited currency of Greek.

As compared with the other "classical" languages, the Latin of the time thus has a viability which is not at all accounted for by humanist theories and attitudes regarding the ancient world. To understand the practices of the Renaissance educator we must look beneath his theories for other things, for the psychological and social drives, for the complex of psychological and social stresses and strains and compulsions to which he is heir and which register in his performance. Here I should like to single out for attention some patterns in the Renaissance teaching of Latin which manifest certain of these complexes and suggest that the Renaissance teaching of Latin involved a survival, or an echo, devious and vague but unmistakably real, of what anthropologists, treating of more primitive peoples, call puberty rites.

II

There is a vast literature on puberty rites, but a brief summary of some of their features will suffice to make the necessary points about Renaissance Latin language teaching and study.¹ Peoples of simpler culture have, almost universally, a

¹ See Hutton Webster, *Primitive Secret Societies*, 2d ed. rev. (New York: Macmillan, 1932), pp. 20-73; A. E. Jensen, *Beschneidung und Reifezeremonien bei Naturvölkern* (Stuttgart: Strecker und Schröder, 1933); Arnold van Gennep, *Les Rites de passage* (Paris: E. Noury, 1909), pp. 93-164; Goblet d'Alviella, "Initiation (Introductory and Primitive)," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. by James Hastings (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1914), VII, 314-319; Charles W. M.

systematic ceremonial induction of adolescent youths into full participation in tribal, as opposed to family and clan, life. These rites have certain more or less well-defined characteristics. The individual being initiated is established in a special "marginal environment" so that the puberty rites are accurately styled by Arnold van Gennep *rites de passage*. The past of the individual is considered to be cut off, and certain excesses—license, theft, arson, violence—are often allowed. This sense of a break from the past may be dramatized, for example, when the home of the boy destined to undergo the rites is invaded by those who are to initiate him and who tear him forcibly from the company of the women, and sometimes physically from the very arms of his mother, who puts up a show of resistance, half conventional and half real. During the period of initiation the boy is made to do many things that are hard, often, it appears, simply because they are hard. In some cases, special taboos are enforced. Thus a boy may not touch his own body anywhere with his hands, but only with a stick—if, for example, he wishes to scratch himself. An atmosphere of continual excitement is cultivated to enlist the youth's interest. As Nathan Miller states it, "Put on edge through ingenious torments, sleeplessness, and nerve-racking frights, the candidate becomes keenly sensitive to the power of

Hart, "Contrasts between Prepubertal and Postpubertal Education," in *Education and Anthropology*, ed. by George D. Spindler (Stanford, Cal.; Stanford University Press, 1955), pp. 127-145, and the discussion by various persons which follows, pp. 145-162, etc. See also Hutton Webster, *Taboo, a Sociological Study* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1942), p. 109n. For a brilliant, if somewhat precious and erratic, extrapolation on a theme relevant to puberty rites, see José Ortega y Gasset, "The Sportive Origin of the State," chap. i in his *Toward a Philosophy of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1941).

his preceptors and indelible, life-long impressions are made.”²

The role of the preceptor is important, for the puberty rites are essentially didactic, “the chief vehicle to link generations in the transmission of the culture complex.”³ The climax is reached in the inculcation of lessons in tribal law, morality, and tradition. Bushman puberty rites, for example, feature religious dances in which animal masquerades predominate. Over all these presides the belief that the youths must be made by their preceptors to assimilate their lessons the hard way. Among the Bechuans, the boys in a state of nudity engage in a dance during which the men of the village pummel them with long, whip-like rods while asking such questions as, “Will you guard the chief well?” or “Will you herd the cattle well?”

Needless to say, because they incorporate youth into the tribe rather than into the family, puberty rites involve sexual segregation. The rites for boys are for boys alone. There are comparable rites for girls, but we are concerned with the boys alone here, for, generally speaking, it is boys alone who are taught in Renaissance schools, or who are given a systematic formal education. There are some few rare references to school education for girls in the Renaissance,⁴ but commonly

² Nathan Miller, “Initiation,” *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. by Edwin R. A. Seligman and Alvin Johnson, VIII (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 49–50.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See Norman Wood, *The Reformation and English Education* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1931), pp. 77–78, 181–182; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 3–7, 28, 159 ff. Cf. Carroll Camden, *The Elizabethan Woman* (New York and London: Elsevier Press, 1952), pp. 44–50; Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), pp. 58–77, esp. pp. 66, 68, 73 (girls’ reading to be in the vernacular); A. F. Leach, *The Schools of Medieval England*, 2d ed. (London: Methuen, 1916), pp. 88–89.

the girls of the time learned what reading and writing they learned outside the schoolroom, in the privacy of the home.

The patterns which put in their appearance here are due to the fact that puberty rites are (or were) more urgent for boys than for girls. Girls normally moved directly from their family of origin to their own family of marriage. Young males, however, needed an intermediate stage, away from their family of origin but not yet in a family of their own making, a period to attune themselves to extrafamilial existence, which includes among other things, the ceremonial fighting marking the behavior not only of human males but also of the males of most, if not all, other animal species.

Puberty rites are thus ceremonial inductions or initiations of the youth into extrafamilial life which involve a sense of break with the past (a "marginal environment") together with segregation from the family and from those of the other sex, and chastisement under the direction of elders for didactic purposes. Any system of schooling which separates boys from girls and is carried on outside the home will, of course, to a greater or lesser extent involve all these things, with the possible exception of chastisement. And it is common knowledge that in the school from early Greek and Roman times well through the Renaissance, chastisement was definitely involved. Thus any formal education through the Renaissance might well tend to activate the complex of behavior on the part of preceptor and student characteristic of puberty rites, and, indeed, almost any conceivable educational procedure outside the home will to some extent do the same thing. The coincidence of various forms of hazing with schooling everywhere is ample evidence of this fact.

The point of this chapter is that, although there are these general connections between school education and puberty rites, in Renaissance times (and to a great extent through the

Middle Ages, as these led into the Renaissance) the status of Latin encouraged in a special way the development of a puberty-rite setting and puberty-rite attitudes in the educational activity of the time, and, incidentally, that traces of these attitudes can be found in the few places where Latin lingers on the educational scene today. This is thus an attempt to explore certain of the complex social implications of Latin as a learned language.

These social implications were large. For when Latin passed out of vernacular usage, a sharp distinction was set up in society between those who knew it and those who did not. The conditions for a "marginal environment" were present. Moreover, the marginal environment was one between the family (which as such used a language other than Latin) and an extrafamilial world of learning (which used Latin). The fact that the marginal environment was primarily a linguistic one only heightened the initiatory aspects of the situation, for the learning of secret meanings and means of communication is a common feature of initiatory rites. It is through ability to communicate that man achieves a sense of belonging.

III

The cleavage between the vernacular world and the Latin world did not coincide with the division between literacy and illiteracy, but it did coincide with the division between family life and a certain type of extrafamilial life and with a division between a world in which women had some say and an almost exclusively male world. Literacy could be, and frequently was, acquired at home, often under the tutorship of women in the family. But this literacy, which can be distinguished from "learning," was commonly restricted to ability to read and write the vernacular. Schools often prescribed that a boy be able to read and write at least the alphabet as a require-

ment for admission,⁵ for it was the business of the school proper to teach, not reading and writing, but the Latin language. This medieval and Renaissance situation still registers in our vocabulary, where elementary schools are called not reading and writing schools but grammar schools—the “grammar” here referring historically to the teaching of beginners’ Latin, which was Latin grammar. This situation meant that, in general, girls, who were educated at home and not in schools, could be quite literate without having any effective direct access at all to the learned world, which was a Latin-writing, Latin-speaking, and even Latin-thinking world. There were only occasional exceptions such as in the Middle Ages the abbess Hroswitha or in the Renaissance the women mentioned in chapter 3, Lady Jane Grey, Margaret More, and Queen Elizabeth—or perhaps Shakespeare’s Portia—to ruffle the masculine sense of self-sufficiency. Because their sex was so committed to the vernacular, women could become—as Raymond W. Chambers and others have shown they did become—both a major audience for English literature and some of its chief patrons.

Closed to girls and to women, the schools, including the universities with their own “schools” (*scholae* or classrooms), were male rendezvous strongly reminiscent of male clubhouses in primitive societies. At the top of the academic structure, in the universities, with the exception of doctors of medicine, who at Paris, for example, were allowed after the year 1452 to marry and continue as regents,⁶ teachers through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (and in many universities

⁵ For example, the statutes of Canterbury School and St. Paul’s School so prescribed in the sixteenth century (Wood, p. 3).

⁶ Hastings Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, new ed. by F. M. Powicke and A. B. Emden (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), I, 446.

much later than the Renaissance) were obliged to remain unmarried so long as they continued active teaching, and this whether or not they were clerics in the ecclesiastical sense at all. Peter Ramus, his erstwhile secretary and biographer tells us, often spoke about marriage but decided to forego it because if he had married he should have had to resign as principal of the Collège de Presles and as a university master.⁷

Somewhat mysterious in its origins and implications, this specially closed environment of the universities was maintained by a long apprenticeship or bachelorship (common to medieval guilds of all sorts) terminating in the *inceptio* or inaugural act of teaching. Today the *inceptio* is echoed really but faintly in the now wholesale ceremony known by the mystifying name of commencement, and words surviving on university diplomas, *periculo facto* or "having undergone the (requisite) danger or trial," bear witness to the old feeling that education was an initiation. But in helping to maintain the closed male environment the psychological role of Latin should not be underestimated. It was the language of those on the "inside," and thus learning Latin at even an infra-university level was the first step toward initiation into the closed world. Earlier groups of learned men—the Academy, the Stoa, the schools at Alexandria—seem never to have achieved the close-knit, jealously guarded internal organization of the university. It seems not irrelevant that they did not have a secret language to nourish their *esprit de corps*.

The humanists, who for various reasons often thought in terms of a home-centered system of education, were hard put to find a substitute for the closed male environment of the

⁷ Nicolas de Nancel (Nancelius), *Petri Rami . . . vita* (Paris, 1599), in Nancel, *Declamationum liber . . . : addita est P. Rami . . . vita . . .* (Paris, 1600), pp. 58–59.

school. One recalls the embarrassment of Erasmus, More, and Ascham when they speak of rearing a youngster in a home where he would hear the proper use of language at an early age. These educators of course mean the proper use of the Latin language—they are giving no thought to the vernacular at all—and they are visibly nonplused by the fact that this means that the youngster will be in the company of women, since it had proved impossible, even for the humanists, to have homes without women in them. Roger Ascham speaks rather glibly of the way in which Tiberius and Caius Gracchus were brought up in the home of their mother Cornelia, where “the dailie use of speaking were the best and readiest waie to learne the Latin tong.”⁸ But Ascham here is not merely resorting to humanist piety by preferring a classical example to a current one. He is bowing before historical fact. There were no current examples, and could be none. We can be sure that no English mothers cooed to their children in the language native to the mother of the Gracchi, and thus we find Sir Thomas Elyot more realistically stating, “After that a childe is come to seven years of age, I holde it expedient that he be taken from the company of women, savyng that he may have, one yere, or two at the most, an auncient and sad matrone attending on hym in his chamber.”⁹

Sir Thomas pleads here that this arrangement will remove the child from temptations against chastity. However, al-

⁸ Roger Ascham, *The Scholemaster*, ed. by Edward Arber, English Reprints, [No. 23] (London, 1870), p. 28. Subsequent references here are all to this edition. See also Lawrence V. Ryan’s scholarly modern-spelling edition of the same work (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press for the Folger Shakespeare Library, 1967).

⁹ Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Boke Named the Governour*, ed. by Henry Herbert Stephen Croft, 2 vols. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1883), I, 35 (Book I, chap. vi).

though this reason might conceivably at times apply with reference to servant girls or other attendants, the separation of the child from his own mother which Elyot seems to envision here, and which families such as Sir John More's practiced (his son Thomas grew up in Cardinal Morton's household), is here generating its own special warrant in humanist educational aims. In cultivating the young boy's ability to speak Latin, women, not being part of the Latin world, were commonly of no use to a child after the age of seven, for this is the age when Elyot and others prescribe that a boy begin to learn and to speak Latin—and, for that matter, Greek as well. The difficulty was that if there were too many women around, the child would speak English, not Latin. He would slip back into the vernacular family circle instead of being forced out already at this tender age into the world of the "tribe," of men. We are faced here with a rather precocious appearance of the puberty-rite situation around the age of seven, but the humanists favored precociousness and promoted it when they could.

Sir Thomas More and others, more realistic, would try to remedy the situation by educating the women of the household, making them not only literate but learned (that is, in Latin). But their efforts would meet with no large-scale success. For some mysterious reason Latin was tied up with schools, and by the time it became accessible to women generally in schools, it had practically disappeared as a medium of communication. Even in its present attenuated form Latin has never been assimilated in the curriculum for girls' schools as it has in certain curricula for boys'. One suspects that something of what it stood for, and in a certain degree still stands for, cannot be assimilated. It is a matter of record that the women students who today matriculate at Oxford or

Cambridge Universities, where some classical tradition remains fairly strong, are almost invariably less well prepared in Latin than the men matriculating from the English public schools. Curricula are the product of complex and fugitive forces, but the forces are real and cannot be gainsaid.

IV

Flogging was a common practice in the schools of antiquity, as we know, for example, from St. Augustine's rueful remarks in the *Confessions* about his own boyhood experiences.¹⁰ The fact that school pupils were all boys of course encouraged rule by the rod. In the Middle Ages not only does this environment and rule persist, but there is evidence that the specifically initiatory cast of the punishment grew more intense and evident. This is made abundantly clear by Leach, who collects stories about the flogging in school of boy aspirants to monasteries which accompanied the early stages of initiation into monastic life, and quotes from Ælfric's *Colloquy* the "highly characteristic" question which Ælfric has his typical master put to his typical pupils: "Are you willing to be flogged (*flagellari*, *beswungen* or *swinged*) while learning?"¹¹ To this the boys—in this case not monastic aspirants—answer at once that they prefer flogging to ignorance. The question, answer, and setting suggest the initiation practice among the Bechuans mentioned above. The boy must acknowledge the equation of learning and flogging, and thereby face courageously into learning as into an initiation, something of itself taxing and fearsome.

¹⁰ St. Augustine, *Confessiones*, Lib. I, cap. ix in *Opera omnia*, Vol. I, *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Series prima (Latina), ed. J.-P. Migne, XXXII (Paris, 1841), cols. 667–668.

¹¹ Leach, pp. 81–82, 89.

Renaissance educators did not, on the whole, abate the ferocity of medieval or ancient school punishment. Pictures of Renaissance classroom activity, such as Pieter Brueghel the Elder's engraving "The Ass at School," feature bundles of switches as regular classroom equipment. "Advanced" ideas on education did not necessarily entail diminishing physical punishment. Whereas an earlier tradition had, in Erasmus' phrase, tended to regard pupils as merely small-sized men, the Renaissance educator was often quite sensitive to the immaturity of his charges and to the psychology of child education. But for him psychology included the use of the birch. In Thomas Murner's *Mnemonic Logic* (*Logica memorativa*, 1509, etc.), which in an extremely "progressive" fashion purveys the otherwise terrifying logic of Peter of Spain in the form of a logical card game, one of the woodcuts of "cards" features a master holding three bundles of switches.¹² These, we are told, are to suggest the three questions, "What? What kind? and How many?" used in handling enunciations, for, as Murner explains, it is with the aid of the switches that the answers to these questions are extracted from the pupils. Switches serve as mnemonic devices in both the real and the allegorical orders.

It is well known that the Renaissance Jesuit plan of education provided for a *corrector* for the "little boys" (in effect, those still studying Latin) to "keep them in fear," although the plan registers an oblique protest against beating as compromising good teacher-pupil relations, for it provides that this *corrector* never be one of the Jesuit teachers but either a per-

¹² Thomas Murner, *Logica memorativa, Chartiludium logice, sive Totius dialectice memoria; et Nonus [i. e. novus] Petri Hispani textus emendatus, cum iucundopictasmatis exercitio . . .* (Strasbourg, 1509), fols. Bv^v-Bvi^r.

son specially hired to do the beating or another student.¹³ We should not suppose that punishment in Renaissance schools was always mild. Nicolas de Nancel, Peter Ramus' biographer and erstwhile pupil and secretary, a physician who goes into biographical detail with a whimsical clinical objectivity, reports that Ramus, who was a highly successful educator with "advanced" ideas, often punished his pupils in savage outbursts of temper, not only whipping but also kicking them until they were "half dead" (*semineces*) although—and Nancel adds wistfully here, "for this he must be praised"—during all this process he never swore.¹⁴

However, although Renaissance reliance on physical violence as a teaching device was not new, the connection of this punishment with Latin teaching acquired a greater urgency. This was due to the greater prestige of Latin established by the humanists, but also to an increasing divorce between Latin and extracurricular life and communication. In the Middle Ages, for casual communication between scholars, young or old, Latin was unblushingly vernacularized. Hence the venture into Latin, while a break with the past, was a relatively less violent break. For the humanist, only "correct" classical Latin should be spoken, even by small boys beginning the language. The break with the past thus reached a kind of maximum in the Renaissance, and the sense of the Latin school as a special marginal environment reached its greatest intensity. The break with the past—that is, with the vernacular of one's childhood—was further enhanced by the concurrent growth of vernacular literature and its greater and greater independence of Latin which marked the Renaissance period.

¹³ See the documents in George E. Ganss, S.J., *Saint Ignatius' Idea of a Jesuit University* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1954), pp. 26, 309, 331.

¹⁴ Nancel, p. 60.

v

In the Renaissance the association of violence with teaching takes another special and interesting turn, for the Renaissance educator appears aware of the teaching environment not only in terms of the violence sometimes resorted to on the side of the teacher but also in terms of the courage which he hopes to develop in his pupils. The emphasis seems connected with the tendency of the humanist educator to think of educating his pupil as a whole person. Humanist teachers frequently functioned less as members of teachers' unions or university faculties than as *familiares* or even employees of bourgeois or noble families. Hence they show an interest in the pupil's total upbringing not so often met with in the medieval university, where all pupils were by definition (if not always in actuality) mere apprentices learning the more or less highly specialized teaching trade.

The new interest manifests itself in the many courtesy books and in the various *rationes studiorum*, or works on educational procedure, which were turned out in the humanist tradition and which connect in many ways with the courtesy literature. In this setting, where educational objectives are formulated under the more or less direct influence of well-to-do or noble households, concerned with family tradition and prestige, there flourishes the Renaissance cult of "glory" and there develops the curious interest in the epic poem, together with the typical Renaissance view that such a poem is the highest creation of the human mind and consequently the normally preferred focus of literary (as apart from oratorical) study. By the same token there develops, under the concurrent influence of Plato's *Republic*, a keen interest in courage (which makes the glorious epic hero) as an express objective in the education of boys.

It has not been sufficiently remarked how much Renaissance poetic and other language study finds itself wandering from the consideration of poetry or language to the consideration of courage, or of its opposite, softness or effeminacy. In part this common deviation is undoubtedly due to the fact that in the Renaissance generally poetry tended to be exclusively a matter for education at what we should consider the secondary-school or even the elementary-school level. With our present upper-division courses and graduate courses in poetry and literature, we are likely to forget that the ordinary Renaissance student finished his rhetoric and poetry in his early teens and went on immediately to "philosophy" and shortly after, if he continued his formal education, to medicine or law or theology.¹⁵ On his own initiative or in some more or less special circumstances a student could study literature at an advanced level, and in the later Renaissance, students, in Great Britain at least, tended to linger on in Latin for a longer time, but, by and large, literary studies in the Renaissance were for youngsters. In the mid-sixteenth century Peter Ramus had explained how his students had finished not only rhetoric (together with what poetry was included in this "art") but philosophy as well by the age of fifteen.¹⁶ Rationalizing about the existing situation, Ramus states that poetry is

¹⁵ See Ganss, p. 45. The curriculum and students' ages here outlined may be taken as fairly representative of Continental practice generally, since the Jesuit program of studies was conceived on an international basis and drawn up by pooling international educational experience.

¹⁶ Peter Ramus, *Oratio de studiis philosophiae et eloquentiae coniungendis*, in Peter Ramus and Omer Talon (Audomarus Talaeus), *Collectanae praefationes, epistolae, orationes* (Marburg, 1599), pp. 248–250; Peter Ramus, *Pro philosophica Parisiensis academiae disciplina oratio*, in his *Scholae in liberales artes* (Basel, 1569), cols. 1019–1020.

taught at a very early age because the logic in it is diluted and thus assimilable by the tender youthful mind, unable to absorb the more concentrated logic of philosophy.¹⁷

This statement that poetry respects young boys' weakness is, of course, another way of saying that it gets them over the weakness. The Jesuit savant Martin Antonio Delrio a few years later will explain how the lowly humane letters toughen the young boys who suffer from too great tenderness in age and mind, preparing them for the weightier disciplines of philosophy, medicine, law, and theology. He goes on to add that not only poetry, but drama, history, oratory, and literature generally should be studied only by young boys, not by adults, whose sole concern with these things should be to edit texts for boys—Delrio is here apologizing for his own pre-occupations, for these remarks of his occur in the preface to his collection or “line-up” (*syntagma*) of Latin tragedies, which turn out to be entirely Senecan.¹⁸ The idea that Seneca is exclusively for children may strike us as amusing and might have seriously upset even the Stoic Seneca himself, but Delrio's views represent one standard Renaissance position, supported chiefly by two considerations. First, in the actuality of the curriculum, if literature was to be studied at all, it had to be studied in the early years of school, for literature was used in the schoolroom chiefly to perfect the boy's competence in Latin so that, as soon as possible, he could move on to philosophy and the sciences. This was not Erasmus' ideal, but then Erasmus' ideal of an education terminating not in philosophy

¹⁷ Peter Ramus, *Oratio initio suae professionis habita* (Paris, 1551), p. 31.

¹⁸ Martin Antonio Delrio, *Syntagma tragoediae Latinae* (Antwerp, 1593), Preface, fols. *3^v, **1^r. A translation of Delrio's Preface by Richard G. Wittmann is available in typescript at St. Louis University on application to the present author.

and science but in language and literary study, with theology itself cast in a grammatical rather than a philosophical mold, was never effectively realized.

A second consideration moving Delrio would have appealed to Erasmus: Seneca was a stern Stoic moralist and could thus be counted on to make the young boy manly and courageous. At this point we are reminded of the tendency of Renaissance educators to assimilate to the linguistic portion of the curriculum not only literary works of Stoics such as Seneca or his nephew Lucan, but also more properly philosophical works, such as the *Enchiridion* of Epictetus, which appears in a great number of Renaissance editions, often together with the *Tabula* of Cebes. The somewhat aphoristic character of the philosophy of the *Enchiridion* made it a congenial adjunct of rhetoric, which often cultivated the epigram. But, more than this, its strong moral and ascetical bias fitted the Stoic philosophy to the puberty-rite mentality which we have been considering here as connected with language study. Epictetus' was a toughening philosophy in a way that Aristotle's was not.

The Renaissance humanist could be disturbed by the plausibility of the charge that literature, and poetry in particular, was actually soft or effeminate, so that, being purveyed to youngsters at the very age when they should be maturing in manliness (the puberty-rite attitudes clearly evince themselves here), it actually only weakens him. This is the burden or background not only of Ramus' opinion that poetry has little "logic" in it but also of Gosson's attack on poetry, revealed by his charge, taken up by Sidney, that poetry is "the schoole of abuse." Although Gosson's principal concern is not poetry taught in schools but drama seen in the playhouses, his resort to the school symbol not only in his title but constantly through his argumentation—"I have been matriculated

my selfe in the schools [i.e., of the stage], where so many abuses flourish. . . . I should tell tales out of Schoole, and be Ferruled for my faulte. . . . Liberty gives you head [i.e., in the playwright's world, conceived of as a school], placing you with Poetrie in the lowest form"¹⁹—leaves no doubt that the case for or against drama and literature generally is to be adjudicated in a pedagogical frame of reference: Do these things serve to make boys men (or men more manly)? Sidney works in this same frame of reference when he asserts that he knows *men*—the word is deliberately pointed and is Sidney's own—"that even with reading of *Amadis de gaule* (which God knoweth wanteth much of a perfect Poesie) have found their hearts moved to the exercise of courtesie, liberalitie, and especially courage."²⁰

In Gosson and Sidney the connections between poetry, courage (or the lack thereof), and the education of young boys are suggested rather than explicitly dealt with. But in specifically educational treatises connected with the courtesy tradition they come definitely to the fore and show some of the real grounds for the Renaissance educator's preoccupation with the hero and with glory—these grounds being in this case associated with the proper toughening of the youth in his initiation into extrafamilial society.

Thus in Book I, chapters x to xvi, of *The Boke Named the Governour* (1531) where Sir Thomas Elyot treats the scholastic curriculum of his youthful pupil, it is striking that at every juncture where he mentions the age of the boy, he

¹⁹ Stephen Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse*, ed. by Edward Arber, English Reprints, [No. 3] (London, 1869), p. 24.

²⁰ Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesie*, in *The Complete Works*, ed. by Albert Feuillerat (Cambridge: The University Press, 1922–26), III, 20; cf. *ibid.*, 28.

brings in courage or "corage" for explicit comment.²¹ At seven, we are told, the child begins grammar, but not in too great detail, for too detailed grammar "mortifieth his corage" (chap. x). Up to his thirteenth year, "the childe courage, inflamed by the frequent redyng of noble poetes, dayly more and more desireth to have experience in those things that they so vehemently do commende in them they write of" (chap. x). After fourteen, and some study of oratory and cosmography, it is time, says Elyot, "to induce a childe to the redyng of histories; but fyrst, to set him in a fervent courage, the mayster . . . expressinge what incomparable delectation, utilitie, and commodite shall happen to emperours, kinges, princis, and all other gentil men by redyng of histories" (chap. xi).

The connection of literature (Latin) with toughness of moral fiber is here explicit, and this toughness of moral fiber goes with physical toughness as well. Thus, says Elyot, "for as moche the membres by movyng and mutuall touching do waxe more hard," physical exercise must be insisted upon for boys, "specially from the age of xiii yeres upwarde, in whiche tyme strength with courage increaseth" (chap. xvi). However, by the time the boy comes to the age of seventeen, a different emphasis must be given, for at this age "to the intent his courage be bridled with reason, hit were needful to rede unto him some warkes of philosophy, especially . . . morall" (chap. xi).

The picture is here complete. By seventeen the child has become something of a man, his courage has been proved and he must now practice what one practices after crossing the threshold of maturity, namely, control. For our present purposes what is of interest is the absolute coincidence in the

²¹ All quotations from Elyot are from the edition cited in n. 9 above.

ending of language studies and the ending of emphasis on developing and proving courage. Both mark the ending of a period of initiation. Courage or "corage" (heart-iness, strength of heart) designates for Elyot something definitely connected with the process of maturing, not merely with high spirits, although it would include this. And this strength of heart is communicated by the study of literature—that is to say, of Latin literature (with some smattering of Greek).

It is true that Elyot is interested specifically in educating a "governor," or, as he puts it elsewhere, a "gentleman," one who rules or at least is part of the ruling class of a *respublica*. Still, his program of Latin and Greek studies for his governor-to-be is basically no different from that of Renaissance schools generally, where it would presumably inspire the same kind of "courage" in the sons of merchants and tradesmen as in prospective governors. In showing how the typical ideal Renaissance educational program built around Latin is suited to nobles—the fighting class, who, above all, must pass through the puberty rites ("Will you guard the chief well?" ask the Bechuans)—Elyot is revealing something of the way this program was felt as operating. In books such as Elyot's the humanists set out to show that even the nobles should be educated men—which, from one point of view, means that the humanistic study of Latin was a good and desirable substitute for more barbaric practices of initiation. In this context, how could it be entirely dissociated from such practices?

A cluster of forces sustaining and sustained by the Renaissance cult of the epic hero and of the epic can be seen here. This view of literature as inculcating "courage" both nourishes and feeds on the cult of the hero and his "glory" which the epic fosters. This cult, which affected governors and governed alike, has far-reaching and mysterious roots in human history.

At this point we can only indicate that the position of Latin in Renaissance culture, the way in which this Latin was taught, the things it was supposed to do to the pupil, and the interest in the epic which by the seventeenth century in Western Europe amounts almost to a frenzy are not unrelated phenomena.

It is true also that Elyot's focus on courage in his educational plan is related to a similar focus in Plato's *Republic*, the major source for much that was explicit in the Renaissance cult of courage. However, the point here is not whether or not Elyot has assignable sources but rather where such sources strike root in his thinking—for not everything that Plato said manages to root itself in Renaissance educational theory or practice. What interests us here in Elyot is the association of courage with language study, and in particular with Latin. The study of Greek for Plato's pupil involved no break with the past. For Elyot's pupil, the study of classical languages did. The Renaissance environment for Platonic ideas was different from the original Greek environment.

Moreover, because of the attitude toward the classical languages peculiar to the humanist tradition, for Renaissance boys the learning of Latin represented, like the passage through puberty rites, not only something difficult but precisely a transit from ignorance to tribal wisdom, that is, to the accumulated wisdom of mankind. This wisdom was thought of as stored behind doors linguistically controlled from the inside. "In the Greeke and Latin tong," writes Ascham, "the two onlie learned tonges, which be kept not in common taulke but in private bookes, we finde alwayes wisdom and eloquence."²² In any generation the wisdom of the past, which is not only the matter communicated to neophytes in

²² Ascham, p. 117

puberty rites but a major item in all formal education, may be thought of as "situated" somewhere. The only point we are making here is that Renaissance man regularly located this somewhere in linguistic terms.

The connection of the teaching of Latin and of literature with puberty rites is further manifest to us, if it was not manifest to Renaissance educators themselves, when these educators explicitly discuss the problem of physical punishment. In the long dialogue on the pro's and con's of corporal punishment with which Roger Ascham opens his famous educational treatise, *The Scholemaster*, he provides glimpses of issues relevant to our present subject which he never really fully exposes. Some pupils have recently run away from Eton, we are told in the course of this dialogue, "for fear of beating," and the discretion of schoolmasters is called into question because they may flog to punish "weakenes of nature rather than the fault of the Scholer," thus actually driving boys from learning.²³ This seems a clear indication that, whether it should be or not, punishment is felt by some masters as advisable for reasons other than the encouragement of formal learning.

We note further on in the dialogue that Master Mason and Master Haddon vastly enjoy reminiscing about schoolboy escapades (one recalls that in puberty rites the ordinary rules of behavior are often suspended and outlawry is regarded with approval). Master Mason proves "very merry with both parties, pleasantly playing with shrewd touches [trials—i.e., of the schoolmaster's patience] of many cours'd [flogged] boys and with the small discretion of many lewd schoolmasters," and Master Haddon remarks that "the best Scholemaster of our time [we know that he refers to Nicholas

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Udall] was the greatest beater.”²⁴ Masters Mason and Haddon here plainly speak not as scholars but simply as men who had “gone through” the *rites de passage* and who look back on such experiences, with their aura of lawlessness, as trials which others should perhaps go through not so much for learning’s sake as simply to prove their prowess as members of the “gang” and to achieve a sense of belonging. This is a line of argumentation which Ascham, like earnest educators today, does not like, but the fact that it is used and reported testifies to an existing state of mind.

Ascham himself suggests that native ability, not attributable to their experience of Udall’s birches, might account for the success of Udall’s pupils and leaves no doubt that he himself is against flogging as a device for teaching Latin. He himself does not state that there were other things besides the mere learning of Latin in the back of Renaissance educators’ minds when they beat their boys. Yet the fact that there were, that the flogging served the purpose—unstated, unformulated, but real—of initiating boys into a tough, man’s world, as suggested by Masters Mason and Haddon, is curiously confirmed by the example which Ascham himself brings forward to prove that beating is not necessary. The example has become classic. For it is an example not of schoolboy or budding young gentleman, but that of a girl, none other than the young Lady Jane Grey, whom Ascham, to his delight, found one day reading Plato’s *Phaedo* while the more boisterous members of her family were out hunting.

Lady Jane was at great pains to explain how nice a person was her teacher, “Master Elmer,” by comparison with her strait-laced parents, by whom she was constantly “so sharplie taunted, so cruellie threatened, yea, presentlie some tymes

²⁴ *Ibid.*

with pinches, nippes, and bobbes.”²⁵ Ascham does not pause to note that, rather than straightforwardly contrasting schooling based on kindness with schooling based on physical punishment, his example really contrasts the romantic world of a maturing young girl with the rough-and-tumble world his society prescribed for young boys. Despite Ascham’s attempt to make something else out of his example, what is remarkable about Lady Jane is not that she is not being flogged—Master Elmer certainly could not have flogged her—but that she is studying the classics *instead* of hunting. This suggests that Lady Jane’s approach to literature was somehow radically different from that of the ideal Renaissance gentleman, who liked both the classics *and* hunting. Had not Ascham himself written a treatise on the use of the longbow?

The *rites de passage* prescribed for the Renaissance gentleman were to initiate him into an aggressively competitive man’s world. For Lady Jane, too, the study of literature was a kind of *rite de passage*, an initiation into a new world ahead and a break with the past. But the breakthrough was at a different point. It opened out upon a pleasant, fanciful, romantic world. As a *rite de passage* the study of literature here meant to a girl something different than to a boy. One made the *passage* to Lady Jane’s world precisely by staying away from the hunt, just as the medieval lady, intrigued with vernacular romances, had done. One thinks of the Green Knight’s lady in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or perhaps even of Paolo and Francesca.

I do not wish to pass on the relative merits of the two worlds, that of literature-and-hunting and that of literature-and-Master-Elmer, or to speculate as to where in the dialectic between the two we are at present situated, but only to point

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

out that they can engender a dialectic because they represent different and opposed positions. In view of this fact, however, it seems not entirely irrelevant that *The Scholemaster*, never published during Ascham's lifetime, is presented to Sir William Cecil and to the world by a woman, who writes the preface, Ascham's widow, Margaret. Nor does it seem entirely irrelevant to this dialectic that corporal punishment and the stress on Latin in school have, pretty generally, been disappearing in modern times with the emergence of coeducation.

VI

This study has been a sketch of certain forces at work in the Renaissance attitudes toward Latin, toward literature, and toward education. It could be elaborated indefinitely, and no doubt refined in many ways, by exploiting more and more examples, of which there is certainly "copie" in Renaissance documents. Here we have limited ourselves to samplings from better-known sources, chiefly British. Perhaps further development is worth while, perhaps not. In either event, we can sum up our present conclusions.

First, I have not sought to maintain that Renaissance educators explicitly thought of Latin study as a puberty rite. They had no definable, abstract idea of what a puberty rite is or was—and neither, for that matter, do the primitive peoples whose puberty rites we have taken as a term of comparison. Renaissance educators, like primitive peoples and like ourselves, have no rationalized explanation for everything they do. They do certain things because they feel these things should be done, finding reasons for them afterwards if at all—and, if they are observant and honest, often being surprised at the reasons which turn up on close inspection.

The basic conclusion is that when Latin, in which learning

was encoded, became in the Renaissance more than ever a school language divorced from family life, initiation into Latin became more than ever a *rite de passage*. Thus, when other Renaissance courses were being labeled “methods” and “systems,” Comenius finds it natural to describe his course in Latin and other languages as a “door”—*Ianua Linguarum* he entitles his famous textbook. Thus, in a Western society destined to become progressively more humane in its educational procedures, the status of Latin helped maintain the relatively violent puberty-rite setting, a sense of existence on a threshold, within a marginal environment (associated with forced seclusion from the company of women and to a certain extent from one’s own family), in an atmosphere of continuous excitement and of that aggressive competition or *aemulatio* which, toned down or outlawed in modern de-Latinized coeducationalism, was a key principle of most Renaissance education.

This complex of attitudes, not new but concentrated with new urgency around language study, helps explain (although I do not wish to suggest that it entirely explains) the frenzied fascination with epic poetry (most of which was in Latin during the Renaissance), with the courageous epic hero (given to war much more than to love-making), with epic theory, and with courage itself, which marks linguistic studies in the period when Renaissance Latin education was having its full effect on society.

Seeing Renaissance Latin teaching in the psychological framework of the puberty rite helps us to explain much in the later trajectory of Latin teaching. In the nineteenth century, when Latin was on its way out as the core subject of the curriculum, educators produced the theory that Latin “strengthened” or “toughened” the mind. This theory, which

is still met with today, has been labeled new,²⁶ and it was new in the sense that earlier educators had not explicitly advanced it. But the complex in which Latin was normally taught had associated the language in a special way with some sort of toughening. Were not nineteenth-century educators, and are not the few twentieth-century educators who repeat their words today, merely giving voice to a vague feeling which has its roots in the psychological setting of the Renaissance Latin school—the feeling that the teaching of Latin, independently of the communication of the ability to read the language (the immediate aim of Renaissance Latin teaching), had somehow to do with toughening the youngster for the extrafamilial world in which he would have to live?

Translated, this means the feeling that a boy's education was basically a puberty rite, a process preparing him for adult life by communicating to him the heritage of a past in a setting which toughened him and thus guaranteed his guarding the heritage for the future. Latin had indubitable connections with the past, and it was hard, indeed all the harder as motivation waned when real use for the language began to wane. This association of Latin with a toughening marginal environment of a puberty-rite type was sufficient to keep Latin in its place as the basic discipline forming the prep school character, with its twin emphases on Latin and physical hardihood (modulated eventually into good sportsmanship).

The perspectives proposed in this chapter are, of course, suggestive rather than complete, but they open the way, I believe, to a better understanding of some curious and important momentums developed by past ideas and practices. And, since it is impossible to study the past without reference to the present, they suggest matter for reflection—forward-

²⁶ See Ganss, pp. 210–211, 219 ff.

looking, let us hope, rather than nostalgic—concerning the twentieth-century situation. Where are the *rites de passage* for youth today? Does a technological society have any? Should it have any? If so, what should they be?