

PRACTICAL LATIN COMPOSITION

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Practical Latin composition by William C. Collar

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WILLIAM C. COLLAR

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COMPOSITION**

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PRACTICAL

LATIN COMPOSITION.

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"The true test of a practical mastery of Latin is the power to write Latin."

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PREFACE.

FOURTEEN years ago, in a paper on writing Latin read before an association of teachers, I quoted from Ascham's "Schole-master," certain passages, to which, as I then said, I owed the suggestion of a pleasant and helpful method of teaching. I now quote the same passages again, because they strike in a quaint chord the key-notes of this little book:—

"After the childe hath learned perfitlie the eight partes of speach, let him then learne the right joyning together of substantives with adjectives, the nowne with the verbe, the relative with the antecedent. And in learninge farther hys Syntaxis, by mine advice, he shall not use the common order in common scholes, for making of latines: wherby, the childe commonlie learneth, first, an evill choice of wordes, (and right choice of wordes, saith *Cesar*, is the foundation of eloquence) than, a wrong placing of wordes: and lastlie, an ill framing of the sentence, with a perverse judgement, both of wordes and sentences. These faultes, taking once roote in yongthe, be never, or hardlie, pluckt away in age. Moreover, there is no one thing, that hath more, either dulled the wittes, or taken awaye the will of children from learning, then the care they have, to satisfie their masters, in making of latines. . . .

"There is a waie touched in the first booke of *Cicero De Oratore*, which, wisely brought into scholes, truely taught, and constantly used, would not onely take wholly away this butcherlie feare in making of latines, but would also, with ease and pleasure, and in short time, as I know by good experience, worke a true choice and placing of wordes, a right ordering of

sentences, an easie understanding of the tonge, a readiness to speake, a facilitie to write, a true judgement, both of his owne, and other mens doinges, what tonge so ever he doth use.

“The waie is this. After the three Concordances learned, as I touched before, let the master read unto hym the Epistles of *Cicero*, gathered together and chosen out by *Sturmius*, for the capacitie of children.

“First, let him teach the childe, cheerfullie and plainlie, the cause and matter of the letter: then, let him construe it into Englishe, so oft, as the childe may easilie carie awaie the understanding of it; lastlie, parse it over perfitlie. This done thus, let the childe, by and by, both construe and parse it over againe: so, that it may appeare, that the childe douteth in nothing, that his master taught him before. After this, the childe must take a paper booke, and sitting in some place, where no man shall prompe him, by him self, let him translate into Englishe his former lesson. Then shewing it to his master, let the master take from him his latin booke, and pausing an houre, at the least, than let the childe translate his owne Englishe into latin againe, in an other paper booke. When the childe bringeth it, turned into latin, the master must compare it with *Tullies* booke, and laie them both together: and where the childe doth well, either in chosing, or true placing of *Tullies* wordes, let the master praise him, and saie here ye do well. For I assure you, there is no such whetstone, to sharpen a good witte and encourage a will to learninge, as is praise.

“But if the childe misse, either in forgetting a worde, or in chaunging a good with a worse, or misordering the sentence, I would not have the master, either froune or chide with him, if the childe have done his diligence, and used no trewardship therein. For I know by good experience, that a childe shall take more profit of two fautes, jentlie warned of, then of foure thinges rightly hitt. For than, the master shall have good occasion to saie unto him: *Tullie* would have used such a worde, not this: *Tullie* would have placed this word here, not there: would have used this case, this number, this person, this degree,

this gender: he would have used this moode, this tens, this simple, rather than this compound: this aduerbe here, not there: he would have ended the sentence with this verbe, not with that nowne or participle. . . .

“Whan the Master shall compare *Tullies* booke with his Scholers translation, let the Master, at the first, lead and teach his scholer, to joyne the Rewles of his Grammer booke, with the examples of his present lesson, untill the Scholer, by him selfe, be hable to fetch out of his Grammer, everie Rewle for everie Example. So, as the Grammer booke be ever in the Scholers hand, and also used of him, as a Dictionarie, for everie present use. This is a lively and perfite waie of teaching of Rewles: where the common waie, used in common Scholes, to read the Grammer alone by it selfe, is tedious for the Master, hard for the Scholer, colde and uncomfutable for them bothe.”

In these few paragraphs we have a method of teaching outlined in a clear, firm hand by one of the greatest of schoolmasters. A method proposed by a great teacher should not in any case be lightly put by; but Ascham adds the testimony and support of his own practice; “I know,” he says, “by good experience.” Still for three hundred years we have neglected the wise words of the old schoolmaster and his straight and simple way, and have gone on beating about the bush, and “making of latines” with the same beggarly results that Ascham saw in his day. Books multiply, ingenious methods abound, teachers grind on with ever more painstaking, but somehow the children do not get ahead as they ought. The processes of education have grown too intricate and mechanical. We have theorized, and systematized, and organized, and directed, and refined, until there seems to be little room left for freedom, originality, or spontaneity. It is sometimes well to take a short turn back to first principles, to nature and common sense. This is what Ascham did. The ingenious methods of the masters of his day, which no doubt were supported by excellent arguments, he cast aside; and while they taught the

"making of latines," he taught his pupils to write Latin, and to read and understand Latin authors. He appears to have laid firm grasp of the principle that all elementary exercise in writing Latin must be based on a portion, however small, of the *ipsisima verba* of a Latin author. All the learner's material he must find there, — order, words, idioms, constructions; in this way the learner is compelled to weigh the meanings of words, to mark attentively changes of form and turns of expression strange to his own tongue, to remember, to imitate, to reproduce.

It is in this capital point that we seem to have wandered far away from Aescham and from reason. Writing and reading, which should go side by side and hand in hand, we have quite divided and divorced. A boy reads about Themistocles, and "makes latines" about 'Balbus.' He reads some moving story of great deeds, and he is set to string such sentences together as, "Hunger is the best sauce." "The constellations are such as they have ever been." "He never sees Cæsar without crying out that it is all over with the army." To this we have been brought by the combined influence of tradition and theory. This is the way preceding generations were taught, and so we teach. The one great stone of stumbling to the learner, it is assumed, is Latin construction. At any rate, Latin syntax is supposed to be the one thing supremely important to be known. And yet the field of syntax is vast; is there not need of system, arrangement, and orderly progression? But if we look at a page of a Latin author, there is manifestly no principle of orderly progression. Things easy and hard, things strange and common, succeed one another without regularity or coherence. If only a Latin text offered within a moderate compass, and in succession, a copious and varied stock of ablative constructions, another of genitives, another of subjunctives, and so on, one might make shift to use the language of his author for purposes of retranslation. Failing of this, there is no help for it but to teach Latin syntax and the writing of Latin in other ways and by other means. Hence the seeming need of manuals, with complete apparatus of rules, cautions, notes, vocabularies, and exercises —

exercises composed of sentences each an isolated unit without interdependence or relation.

This is "a very perfite waie" of muddling a learner, because it effectually breaks all the threads of association. He is still supposed to be studying Latin, but the subject-matter of his study and his mental processes have no relation to those from which he has been diverted. Certain principles are enunciated, certain rules are laid down, certain words are given, and the problem is to form sentences of these words in accordance with the rules. The process is necessarily a mechanical one and the product artificial. What the student has learned from his text, that is, at first hand through direct contact with the living language, cannot be utilized, and so can neither be confirmed nor developed, when subject, ideas, words, relations are all changed. Moreover, this practice takes no account of those half lights, those latent memories, those unnoted observations, those vague associations that move in the train of conscious thought, as one ponders his text, and that are ready to spring up into the consciousness under favoring conditions and become elements of positive knowledge.

It is not contended for a moment that writing Latin is an end *per se*; it is neither a practical necessity to educated men in general, nor is it even, considered relatively, a highly desirable accomplishment. But it will probably be conceded that, while pursued for a higher ulterior purpose, it ought to aid the learner in reading and understanding Latin authors. By the common method it fails to do this, because, as I have said, writing is utterly divorced from reading. It is not the supplemental study of the same subject from the opposite side, but something different in the deceptive guise of sameness. But the intellectual loss is greater and more serious, because continuity of thought, memory, and association, are all broken, without any compensating gain.

The training of the mind, not the imparting of knowledge, is the chief function of education. Given, then, the Latin language as an instrument of mental training, the question is, how