The Ears of Hermes

Bettini, Maurizio, Short, William Michael

Published by The Ohio State University Press


Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/24274.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24274
Is it possible for someone forced to learn Latin in four years and under threat of the rod to ever develop lasting affection for classical literature? Not normally—and Samuel Butler was no exception. Having suffered such treatment from an early age, in fact Samuel developed an enduring hatred of the classics. This was not the outcome that his father, the Reverend Thomas Butler, had hoped for when he decided to teach his son the language of Cicero and Virgil, of course. Nor did he have this end in mind when he sent young Samuel away to receive lessons from Professor Kennedy, celebrated professor of classical languages at Shrewsbury. (Describing his experience at the school, the scholar would later write: “You are surrounded on every side by lies.”) Despite his father’s great hopes, however, that is exactly how things turned out. Samuel learned to hate the classics—except for Homer—just as he learned to hate Tennyson, whom his grandfather, the respected Bishop Butler, had revered.

In the course of his life Samuel became a writer and thus had the opportunity to voice many sentiments that others in his position might have felt compelled to keep quiet. In his autobiographical novel *The Way of All Flesh*, the character Ernest (Samuel’s counterpart) submits an important article for publication in the academic journal edited by his college. In a nutshell, the hypothesis advanced in this article was that Aristophanes, a writer as perceptive as he was outspoken, had given expression to the Athenians’ true feelings
for their dramaturges: disgust. According to Ernest/Samuel, the Greeks frequented the theater in the same spirit as his contemporary Englishmen went to church: they went because everyone else did, though they were bored to death by sermons. Apparently, when someone learns to hate something as a child, that hatred is true and lasting! (As for Tennyson, Samuel was pleased to discover—and recount—that the poet laureate was actually an avid collector of dirty jokes and quite foul-mouthed . . . in private, naturally).1

Someone who detests Greek theater and compares it to the church in which his father and grandfather had preached each Sunday morning, is surely deserving of our confidence—not because his opinions were necessarily correct, but because they were, at the very least, original. In fact, Butler had a number of idiosyncratic ideas about the classics. The reader will recall, for example, *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, a book in which Butler suggested a solution to the knotty problem of the “differences” between the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, arguing that the *Odyssey* had been written by a woman2—a decidedly unusual proposition, even if Butler was not the first to make it.3 Or, the reader will think of those pages of *Erewhon* in which Butler describes the system of education used in that strange (and remarkably postmodernist) country his lively imagination had dreamed up “over the range.” Even if somewhat disguised, the classics make an appearance there as well:

The main feature in their system is the prominence which they give to a study which I can only translate by the word “hypothetics.” They argue thus—that to teach a boy merely the nature of the things which exist in the world around him, and about which he will have to be conversant during his whole life, would be giving him but a narrow and shallow conception of the universe, which it is urged might contain all manner of things which are not now to be found therein. To open his eyes to these possibilities, and so to prepare him for all sorts of emergencies, is the object of this system of hypothetics. To imagine a set of utterly strange and impossible contingencies, and require the youths to give intelligent answers to the questions that arise therefrom, is reckoned the fittest conceivable way of preparing them for the actual conduct of their affairs in after life.

Thus they are taught what is called the hypothetical language for many of their best years—a language which was originally composed at a time when the country was in a very different state of civilisation to what it is at present, a state which has long since disappeared and been superseded.

1. On these aspects of Butler’s biography, see Henderson 1967, 4ff.
2. Butler 1897.
Many valuable maxims and noble thoughts which were at one time concealed in it have become current in their modern literature, and have been translated over and over again into the language now spoken. Surely then it would seem enough that the study of the original language should be confined to the few whose instincts led them naturally to pursue it.

But the Erewhonians think differently; the store they set by this hypothetical language can hardly be believed; they will even give any one a maintenance for life if he attains a considerable proficiency in the study of it; nay, they will spend years in learning to translate some of their own good poetry into the hypothetical language—to do so with fluency being reckoned a distinguishing mark of a scholar and a gentleman.\

No doubt readers are meant to understand “the hypothetical language” as a reference to Latin—the language that Samuel’s father, armed with a rod, began to teach him when he was just four years old. The tone is ironic and surely Butler would have preferred that the inhabitants of Erewhon had devoted the better years of their children’s lives not to “the hypothetical language” but to something more concrete. It is easy to imagine what the author’s judgment would be of “giving a maintenance for life” to anyone who “attains a considerable proficiency in the study of it,” as was the case of Professor Kennedy of the Shrewsbury school. Sometimes hatred serves us better than affection, however, and for this reason we invite the reader to take seriously Butler’s metaphorical invention—the classics as “hypothetics,” a way of opening our eyes to all the possibilities that may be encountered in the universe, including those that do not belong to the here and now.

In my opinion, Butler’s hatred of the classics actually led him to an appropriate way of thinking. Here we may cite the opinion of Michel de Montaigne, as well. Montaigne had learned Latin at an even earlier age than Butler, apparently even before he learned French. In contrast to Butler, however, Montaigne demonstrated throughout his entire life an extraordinary love for the classics. He wrote: “Though I be engaged to one forme, I doe not tie the world unto it, as every man doth. And I beleve and conceive a thousand manners of life.” Here is another example of “hypothetics”—imagining and conceiving a thousand other manners of life precisely because, as the Erewhonians would later claim, “to imagine a set of utterly strange and impossible contingencies” constitutes the best form of education. The practice of a system of “hypothetics,” or the exercise of continually imagining “a thousand manners of life,” as Montaigne did, helps us to not only

appreciate the richness of what is possible, but also console ourselves about the anguish of the present (or what everyone believes is the present). For in fact, as the Erewhonians suggested, the universe “might contain all manner of things which are not now to be found therein.”

I have chosen to begin this book speaking about Butler and his hatred for the classics (and of the use that the Erewhonians made of “hypothetics”) not merely for the pleasure of citation. The fact is that I find myself to some degree sympathetic to his situation (including a certain hostility for teaching Latin in the way that it was taught to Butler). Yet I am even more enthusiastic about the possibility that in modern culture the classics can function precisely as “hypothetics”—in other words, as a starting point for thinking about the “thousand manners of life,” as Montaigne advocated. It is this perspective that I have tried to take in putting together *The Ears of Hermes*. I am convinced, in fact, that the Greeks and Romans, though in some respects very similar to us, most often conceived things in a much different way than we do, and are able, therefore, to open our eyes to so many “possibilities” of life that otherwise we might not be able to see. The Greek and the Romans told exciting—yet different—stories. They elaborated profound—yet different—symbols. Above all, they confronted problems in many ways similar to those we find ourselves confronting today—e.g., the permanence of memory and the snare of forgetfulness, the perils of identity and the strategies necessary for constructing it, the pretensions of moral absolutes and the relativity of customs, and so on—yet with a different approach, because their worldview and the resources of their culture were different than ours. All these analogies and discrepancies constitute an extraordinary deposit of “hypothetics,” a rich vein of alternate potentialities that the presence of the classics—thanks to the care devoted to them by so many generations of readers and scholars—permits us to continue mining. Why would we not choose to do so?

Certainly not because some of our contemporaries allege that the classics long ago ceased being relevant, and that, in order to be a citizen of the world, it is enough to know English and computer science. And certainly not because others are instead preoccupied with keeping the classics all to themselves, pruning them of all that would render them of interest to modern culture. Perhaps they should remember Erewhon and the fact that the universe “might contain all manner of things which are not now to be found therein.”