

An Inspiring Experience

I suppose the most inspiring experience in my life was the Damascus-like experience which, apparently contradicting all I thought I believed, led to my conversion to Catholicism. As, however, I have related this in the semi-autobiographical story, "Dear to My Heart", in April 2007 and alluded to it in another semi-autobiographical story, "Bob Reminisces", in November 2011, I shall not tell it again.

Instead I shall be wholly autobiographical and recall a less dramatic inspiring experience, since it did not occur suddenly or unexpectedly at one particular moment, but rather occupied one period of my life. It was, nevertheless, a life-changing experience. I refer to my time in the Sixth Form¹ at school.

I had learnt Latin, French and ancient Greek at school. The first two were compulsory. I had chosen Greek in the Fourth Form², rather than Spanish or German, reasoning that: "Spanish is pretty easy; I can teach myself that. German may be trickier but should be manageable. Greek is the most difficult of the three, so it makes sense to be taught it if I have the opportunity."

I was, and still am, fascinated by languages and their structures and try to get to grips with as many as I can. So I chose Greek because it was the most difficult of the three languages, and for no other reason.

In the Sixth Form, I would have liked to have studied Latin, Greek and French. But in those far off days, all the fancy variations now offered to modern students simply did not exist. If you did French, it was because you were a 'Modern Linguist' and your three examination subjects must be English, French and either Spanish or German. If you wanted to do Latin and Greek, your third subject had to be Ancient History. So that was it: I was doing Latin, Greek and Ancient History, instead of three languages.

Hitherto I had been learning Latin, French and Greek as languages *per se*. Translation from English to the language and from the language to English was just that: nothing particularly creative, just a linguistic exercise which I could manage very well. I liked French *dictée*, because if you understood the structure of French with, for example, its many silent verb endings, you could do the *dictée* almost perfectly; and I normally did. I just loved language, as I still do.

But in the Sixth Form, Latin and Greek became more than just language. I realized they had a *literature*. Of course I had been vaguely aware of that since we had set texts for the O Level³ examinations. But boning up on the translation of set Greek texts does not exactly give one an appreciation of the texts as literature. As for the Latin set texts, I regret they were so badly taught that I simply did not bother, as I was convinced – quite correctly as it happened – that my command of the language was so good I could easily pass by taking the unseen verse and unseen prose translation options.

No, it was not until the Sixth Form that I really appreciated that there was a vast literature written in those languages. Indeed, it was then that Latin and

¹ Post 16 education - typically the last two years of secondary education; now called Years 12 & 13 in England & Wales (Northern Ireland: Years 13 & 14; Scotland: Secondary 5 & 6) and equivalent to the USA 11th & 12th grades.

² Now called Year 10 in England & Wales (Northern Ireland: Year 11; Scotland: Secondary 3) and equivalent to USA 9th grade.

³ General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level introduced in 1951 in England, Wales & Northern Ireland as a replacement for the 16+School Certificate. It was replaced in 1988 by the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE).

Greek actually came *alive*. There was a real reason for learning Latin: not the spurious "training of the mind" nonsense that had been trotted out before – you can train your mind by learning to play chess well, or bridge or many other things. Rather, I realized, by learning Latin you could read Cicero, Caesar, Vergil, Horace, Catullus and others for yourself, without the intermediary of a translator. Indeed, it became very apparent that no translator, however good, can properly capture all the original; this is especially so of verse. This was the reward for five years of learning Latin. It opened my eyes and mind to *literature* – something I have enjoyed ever since.

I also found great enjoyment from Latin prose composition. This was not the fairly banal translation exercises of pre-O Level Latin; this was something *creative*. This was re-interpreting thoughts expressed in the prose of one language, i.e. English, and recreating them in what, we hoped, a Roman of the Classical period might have written. One, not uncommon, exercise was to take a leader from 'The Times' of the day and recast it into Classical Latin. It needed imagination and creativity. This, I am sure, was the spark that set off my liking for creative writing.

You will note that I have not mentioned Greek in the above two paragraphs. I had, as I have said, been learning Latin for five years before entering the Sixth Form. But I had been learning Greek, a more complex language with far greater alternate grammatical forms, for only two years, so it was not quite so easy. Prose composition was more of a challenge, but I grew to love reading literature in the original. I found I could read the New Testament in its original language and, when I bought a Greek Testament, I used to follow the Greek text as the English was being read in church.

I have since often read French in the original and even managed once to read a Welsh novel in the original. I have followed Dante and Vergil down through Hell and up the other side of the world to Mount Purgatory. I am afraid I have left them on the lower slopes of the mountain; I must brush up my Italian again and follow them to the summit and share their vision of paradise. But I digress.

It was not only in the 'official' Latin and Greek studies that I found new inspiration (I confess I did not get much inspiration from Ancient History); I found it also in two sets of lessons that were given to broaden our minds and prevent our becoming too narrow in our studies.

One such series of lessons was 'General English' which all Sixth Formers, not taking English, were expected to attend. Now, free from any examination constraints, the English master was able to do whatever he choose; and what he chose was modern poetry. He began, however, with Gerard Manley Hopkins and his 'sprung rhythm.' What a revelation!

Hitherto I had, of course, met verses and poems throughout my school days. I accepted them as 'things one does at school': some guy had got excited about seeing a whole lot of daffodils, and others liked writing about Assyrians coming down like a wolf on the plain, or soldiers blindly charging into the valley of death or a damsel shut up in a tower and doomed to die when she caught sight of Lancelot, and so forth. They did not mean much in 'real life'.

But Hopkins was different; his poems spoke to me. I read poems because I wanted to; I learnt poems by heart because I wished to. I tried writing verse in sprung rhythm because I desired to create poetry. I had found a whole new world.

Nor was it only Hopkins. I enjoyed discovering other modern poets; some I

liked better than others. I particularly liked the First World War poets, Wilfrid Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Thus began a life long love of poetry which has not been confined just to moderns. It enhanced also my growing love of Classical verse.

It broadened my love of creative writing, especially verse. I have off and on ever since those days composed verse pieces, some even in Latin; alas, I have lost most of them. But in recent years quite a few of my pieces for the Moles have been in verse.

But let me turn to the other set of lessons to which I referred earlier. This was 'General Science' which all Arts students were expected to attend. Fortunately, we had a brilliant and enthusiastic teacher. With no set syllabus to follow he could pursue things that interested him, convey his own enthusiasm and spark our own interest. Thus I met relativity; I discovered that time was not a constant but was relative and slowed up, the faster one traveled; that one's mass increased also as one got closer and closer to the speed of light.

He was interested also in cosmology. We explored together different theories. I cannot recall them all now. But I do remember a theory of the universe that expanded like a bubble, contracted upon itself, expanded again *ad infinitum*. I met the Big Bang theory of the Belgian Catholic priest, Georges Lemaître. It was treated as a curiosity (and in those days, I must confess, that as it had been proposed by a Catholic priest, I rather dismissed it). The prevailing opinion of the time favored Hoyle's Steady State theory, which now, more than half a century later, is generally discredited.

Other theories were discussed, including the possibility of other universes besides our own. It was all fascinating stuff and kindled an interest, which I have had ever since, in relativity and quantum physics, in cosmology and the possibility of other universes. I have explored some of these ideas in stories I have written for the Moles, e.g. Richard Henderson (March 2006), Among my Souvenirs (July 2006), I Saw His Face at the Window (March 2007), Transformation (June 2007), It's about Time (February 2009 - a story I particularly like) and others.

It is said sometimes that schooldays are the happiest days of one's life. In my experience that is baloney. Would I wish to relive my schooldays? The answer is decidedly no. But would I like to relive the Sixth Form days? Well, maybe. They were an inspirational experience and the inspirations they set in train have remained with me till the present day.