

CATHOLIC LITERARY TEXT BOOKS.

There appeared, in a recent issue of this journal, an excerpt from the editorial writings of Mr. Maurice F. Egan, the manner and matter of which, I venture to say, have pained and surprised many of your readers. The extract in question, which first appeared in the *New York Freeman's Journal*, of which organ Mr. Egan is the capable editor, purports to be a reply to the question of some youthful correspondent. The versatile author, editor and poet is too well known and too highly respected to be lightly accused of unfair and shallow criticism. Yet, after reading this very extraordinary extract, I am unfortunately at a loss for milder terms wherewith to adequately describe the brusque and unprovoked attack which this sweet versifier and perfect master of rhythmical prose, makes on the literary works of two deserving authors, one of whom has long been numbered with the dead.

The article is probably too fresh in the minds of your readers to necessitate a reproduction in full. It will be sufficient for me to cite here the portion of it to which I wish particularly to advert. Says Mr. Egan:

"If our colleges had a real course of literature instead of sham courses, a thorough spirit of appreciation and criticism would be generated. But, with one or two exceptions, the English literature in Catholic seminaries and colleges is founded on *Jenkins' absurd book*, or John O'Kane Murray's *ridiculous Catechism of Literature*." The italics are mine, and are employed to direct the attention of my readers to the parts of this quotation which I most dislike.

The writing of Mr. Egan, like that of all men of real ability, whether its principles be correct or the reverse, is full of suggestiveness. Be this as it may, the internal evidence which the article now under discussion bears of having been written in extreme haste is, to my mind, at least, its best excuse. Even when considered as the result of a hasty effort, it is still so unlike the just and gentle criticism of the gentleman who wrote it, that I find no difficulty in imagining it to be the unworthy production of another, and less admirable manner of man. To let it pass by under such circumstances without serious animadversion, would beto do a greater injury to its author than he does to its distinguished subjects.

The two propositions which I have quoted from Mr. Egan may be said each to consist of two parts; the one, veracious and incontrovertible, and the other open to broad discussion. I must of course, entirely agree with Mr. Egan, when he says that if all Catholic colleges taught real courses of English literature, instead of sham ones, much would be done towards producing able authors, agreeable conversers, and competent critics. But the remark applies to the preparatory studies necessary for all the professions and simply amounts to the truism that if all shams were made to vanish there would be no shams. I must, however, be allowed to doubt that all Catholic colleges "except one or two," teach sham courses of literature, and on this important point, and its germane considerations, I desire to express a few plain convictions.

Let me premise by saying that it is really unkind of Mr. Egan to withhold the name or names of the one or two Catholic colleges, wherein he is of opinion that literary courses which are something more than mere shams are followed. Max Muller has calculated that at the close of the next two centuries, there will be in the world 58,870,000 people speaking the Italian language; 72,571,000 the French; 157,480,000 the German; 505,288,000 the Spanish, and 1,887,268,168 the English. Now, Mr. Egan must be as familiar with those startling statistics of the learned German as I am with my slippers, and surely it is not too much to ask him to deal fairly with that unborn multitude of urchins who are to be privileged to use the English tongue.

Mr. Egan, as I have said, is a very suggestive writer. The question which he has opened in his somewhat remarkable piece of writing has awakened several trains of ideas in my mind, one of which at least I may mention here. Too often accuracy and brilliancy of expression are looked upon in our schools and colleges as of small importance. Teachers too frequently confine their efforts to training their students to express their ideas in the rough, without making much effort to direct them in forming a strong and elegant style. They train them as stone-cutters when they should

train them as lapidaries. This is certainly a great error, and one which produces an abundant harvest of bad fruit; but it is not an error particular to Catholic colleges, with "one or two" exceptions. Indeed, the necessity for training that will make wrong writing and ungrammatical speaking less common, is almost as absent from the mind of the Protestant as from the Catholic educationist. Although I say this, I have not the slightest intention of descending to a mere *tu quoque* argument. To avoid this I shall make use of certain utterances of President Eliot of Harvard, as published in the *Century Magazine*. After fully indicating the importance of a complete course of English, President Eliot says:

"And now, with all this wonderful treasure within reach of our youth, what is the position of American schools and colleges in regard to teaching English? Has English literature the foremost place in the programme of school? By no means; at best only a subordinate place, and in many schools no place at all." I might make this citation much longer, but enough has been adduced for present purposes. Perhaps the frank avowal of this competent authority will justify me in affirming that the literary courses pursued in Catholic colleges, or at least in the more pretentious Canadian Catholic colleges, are sound and practical; fully equaling, in both those vitally important respects, the courses pursued in the average non-Catholic colleges and schools. Then many Catholic colleges in the United States have earned for themselves an enviable reputation in the matter of teaching English correctly. But even if our Catholic schools and colleges were as defective in this respect as Mr. Egan describes them to be, I do not believe he would reform them by pointing out their defects to his youthful correspondents. Such questions, it may be said, are easier to start than to run down, and the pursuit of them becomes a very weary sport at last.

There is a close connection between wrong writing and wrong thinking. They grow out of each other as cause and effect, like the drupes of a poison plant. The man who writes loosely, sees loosely, thinks loosely, and speaks loosely. Words have not for him the same meaning at all times and in all circumstances. Instead of being fixed and stationary in his hands, they are mere movable forms, shifting sands. As a natural consequence, they do not convey to others, as he uses them, the idea or impression that is in his mind. Dr. Hugh Blair expresses a sentiment which every educationist should keep steadily in view. "One of the most distinguishing privileges which providence has conferred upon mankind," says Blair, "is the power of communicating their thoughts to one another." Manifestly then, the whole question resolves itself into the simple postulate, that teachers of every creed, or for that matter of no creed, should train their pupils to think and compose correctly in English. Much has been said as to the advisability, or otherwise, of devoting a large amount of time to the Latin and Greek classics. Let Latin and Greek be provided for all who desire those useful languages; but above all and for all, let a thorough course of English thinking, English speaking, and English writing be assured.

Mr. Egan considers it outrageous to found a course of English literature on the text-book of the Rev. O. L. Jenkins, or that of Mr. John O'Kane Murray. It may be superfluous to point out that there is a vast deal of difference between laying the foundation of a building and rearing its superstructure. Provided the stones used in a foundation be sound, it does not matter whether they are composed of common lime-stone or Parian marble. The same rule holds good of all the speculations by which the mind is moulded, cultured and enlarged. The first requisite, then, in a literary text book is moral reliability, and this, I venture to say, the work of the Rev. Mr. Jenkins possesses in satiety.

I humbly submit that the Hand-book of Literature is well adapted to make a young student familiar with the outline of English literature. No one can study the volume, with the assiduity which its contents deserve, without gaining a sufficient and correct idea of the salient features in the chequered lives and works of the great writers. If the young student can obtain a glance at the immense array of poets, philosophers, historians, commentators, critics, satirists, dramatists, novelists, and orators who have formed and enriched the English language, he must be captious and peevish