

## ROUND THE TABLE.

This is *par excellence* the age of school-books. Nay, we believe we can go further and say this is the golden age of school-books. For a golden age is ever the sunset glory which heralds the decline of day, the hectic flush of the consumptive patient which precedes decease; and we are of opinion that school-books, at least such as they exist at present, are not destined to continue to play such an all-important part with the young generations of the future. Now it has ever been that institutions, which, though to the careless eye at the summit of their greatness, still show to the penetrating observer symptoms of approaching decay, have turned with a wistful fondness to their early history, as though they could restore their failing powers by contemplating the relics of their vigorous though uncouth youth.

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In accordance, then, with this view it will not be out of place to afford a glimpse of the hand-book from which the Puritan Fathers nourished the intellectual youth of New England, a recent reprint of which book, truly extraordinary to our modern eyes, has lately come in our way; and apart even from the historical significance which, as we have indicated, we attribute to it, we think that a few quotations will prove interesting. The full title, for apparently the compilers sought to kill the proverbial two birds with one stone and instil the alphabet and theology at one fell swoop, is "The New England Primer, improved for the more easy attaining The True Reading of English, to which is added The Assembles of Divines, and Mr. Cotton's Catechism."

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The first part of the book, which altogether is not larger than 60 pages of 24 mo., is devoted to the usual alphabet, followed by words of one, two and three syllables, and then come the lines intended to stamp the initials of the different words on the young learner. Instead, however, of the familiar "A is an Apple as round as a ball," we have the more sober and impressive:

"In ADAM'S Fall  
We sinned all."

And soon, instead of "G is for Garden where fairy flowers blow," we have the sombre lines, to which is prefixed a picture of an hour glass:

"As runs the GLASS  
Our life doth pass."

Modern horn-books appeal to the carnal senses with, "O is an Orange so soft and so sweet," but the stern Pilgrims conveyed the lesson in the implied warning:

"Young OBADIAS,  
David, Josias,  
All were pious,"

the picture illustrating which shows three unhappy looking young gentlemen with extremely big sceptres and very uncomfortable crowns.

The simple couplet,

"Young pious RUTH  
Left all for truth,"

serves to impress the letter R on the budding intellect, the "all" in the engraving being a sort of dog-kennel, utterly devoid of all seductive ornament.

The book then gives the ten commandments, the Lord's prayer, the creed, &c; and afterwards a short account of the martyrdom of Mr. John Rogers in the reign of Queen Mary, which serves to introduce some pages in verse of advice to his children which he wrote some days before his death. The appended woodcut represents the unhappy martyr in the midst of a conflagration that strongly resembles a lunch-basket bedecked with ostrich feathers, while two colossal guards stand by, armed with gigantic partizans, and gloat in a hideous manner over the young recipients of the advice, who are assembled to witness the misery of their parent.

The volume is concluded with "The Shorter Catechism," whose brevity we that have never seen a longer can hardly appreciate, and a series of questions and answers described by the somewhat picturesque title, "Spiritual Milk for American Babes, drawn out of the breast of both Testaments for their soul's nourishment."

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Fidelis, reviewing Archibald Lampman's poems in the *Week*, touched upon two interesting and debatable points in literary criticism. In dealing with his purely descriptive poems, as "Among the Timothy," "Winter," "Winter Hues Recalled," she remarks, "While there is true and delicate description, we miss *something more*, something which would have given the description greater value. . . . It is indeed a common tendency among some of the most popular poets of our day to fall into the old Greek habit of resting in 'Nature,' instead of fulfilling the nobler functions of *interpreter*, without which Poetry is 'divine poetry,' no longer."

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We cannot praise her dispassionate review too highly. Indeed, elsewhere she does full justice to the harmony of his delicate description, and reminds us without telling us so that our own review was inadequate in this respect. But the principle that she advances will repay examination if we attempt to apply it to all poetry.

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We have all been somewhat spoiled by the poetry we inherit from the first decades of this century. Fidelis, it is evident, demands the presence in large quantities of something wherewith to dilute the too strong essence of unadulterated Nature, or to support this spirit once deemed so strong when she totters. She tells us not whether it be the milk of human kindness or the foam of human wrath that best attempers, in Swinburnian phraseology, the wine of divine song; whether she prefer Byron's message of wrath to mankind framed in a tempest setting of thunder, or Wordsworth's aphoristic purpose, assisted by the presence of some field-daisy, which submits to be thus apostrophized—

"May peace come never to his nest,  
Who shall improve thee!"

Was it not Swinburne who said, certainly with a measure of truth when comparing the different attitudes of this century's poets towards Nature that "Wordsworth uses her as a vegetable fit to shred into his pot and pare down like the outer leaves of a lettuce for didactic and culinary purposes?"

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But omitting much that might be said of this great poet's method of viewing Nature and of the worshipful homage that his contemporaries paid to her, we ask if it is not well that a young writer should confine himself for the most part to pure description? With this limitation set upon himself till his hand grow strong, he will escape all aphoristic tendencies, and cannot at either extreme of Nature-worship be offensive. Nature has too often been made a peg to hang the eloquent robes of misery upon, or a scare-crow for the rags of scanty ideas.

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Victor Hugo speaks of the song within us that responds to the song without, and prays that his own verse may be at least the echo of an echo. Mr. Lampman has not always aspired even to this degree, but has devoted himself for the most part to the faithful painting of the song without us. If he had done no more he would have achieved much by the certainty and refinement of his touch. But the force of Fidelis' objection is broken where she admits in some of the poems the presence of the two essentials of human sympathy and description. Can we ask for more? Must a poem of fifty lines contain all excellences, and must we look for tragedy when laughter asserts that we are present at a comedy?

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Readers of "Among the Millet" will see in how far her objection is valid. Some of the poems are entirely free from reference to humanity, but are certainly worthy to live by their own beauty as pictures. In other portions of his work there are also visible signs of a future mastery over subjects with a dash of human interest.