

Special Papers.

BAIN'S "TEACHING ENGLISH."*

BY W. TYTLER, B.A.

THE course which, as teachers of English, we are expected to follow, is indicated by the Educational Department in three ways.

- (1) By the High School course.
 - (2) By the text books.
 - (3) By the Departmental Examination papers.
- The subject usually known by the name of English Literature, is subdivided into two parts.
- (1) Composition and Prose Literature.
 - (2) Poetical Literature.

In the former of these, we have prescribed, "The framing of sentences and paragraphs—paraphrasing of prose—expansion and contraction of prose passages—synonyms—the correction of errors—the elements and qualities of style—critical reading of, and themes based upon, the prose literature prescribed for the form—familiar and business letters."

For *poetical literature*, we have assigned, "The critical reading of such poetical texts as may be prescribed by the Educational Department from time to time."

These two divisions of the English department differ widely in the nature of the work to be done. In the latter, critical reading alone is required; while in the former, in addition to the examination of the prescribed text, there is a large amount of other work which may be all ranked under the general name of *composition*.

The examination papers set by the departmental examiners, follow the same lines.

Three text books are authorized by the Minister of Education, in the department of English literature.

For Form I. and II.—*William's Composition*.

For Form III.—*McElroy's Prose Composition*.

For Training Institute—*Bain's Teaching English*.

The two first of these, the only ones, it must be noticed, which are authorized as High School text books, have reference entirely to prose, and the former is specially designed to teach composition.

It is the third of these text books—Dr. Bain's work, "*On Teaching English*," that I shall examine to-day, in order that we may arrive at some conclusion as to its suitability for the purpose for which it is assigned, and also that the examination may serve to elicit, from the members of this Association, opinions on the proper method of teaching the important subject with which it deals.

We find the book divided into chapters with the following headings:—

- I. Exercises in Grammar.
- II. and III. Higher English Teaching.
- IV. How not to do it.
- V. Intellectual Qualities of Style.
- VI. Emotional Qualities of Style.
- VII. Definition of Poetry.

Chapters VI. and VII. have reference to poetry, and will be considered later. We shall, in the meantime, confine our attention to *Prose Literature*. The first five chapters have reference chiefly to the teaching of English by the study of prose authors.

Prose literature is to be studied not only and not chiefly that our pupils may learn to appreciate the qualities of the authors' style, and admire the beauty and force with which great truths and new ideas are expressed; but rather that they may, by a careful study of a recognized model, so far as their abilities will permit, learn to express their thoughts with a degree of excellence of style within some measurable distance of what they have been taught to admire.

In poetry, however, the end in view is totally different; we do not place a poem in the hands of a class, and study it with them carefully and critically to be able to imitate it. Our pupils are taught to appreciate the beauties of the poet's style, his force and pathos, that they may have their whole being—mind and soul—ennobled and refined by the subtle influence of great thoughts and noble feelings fittingly expressed.

As McElroy says in his introduction, "The limitation of the book to prose has been adopted because I believe that everyone who will apply

himself can acquire appreciable skill in this kind of writing; while poetry and romance are products of exceptionally endowed minds."

Dr. Bain is not so much concerned that the author examined should be a model of style, and the reason of this will soon become evident. What he chiefly recommends is constant practice in the examination of writings of authors of all degrees of excellence. This is to be done chiefly with a view to the study of the order and arrangement of the words, phrases and clauses of their sentences.

No one will question that this is an exercise of great practical importance. More than anything else it is fitted to impress on pupils what they are so slow to learn, that one of the most important things in writing is the placing of principal and of subordinate words and clauses in their proper positions; that it really does make a great difference how the different parts of the sentence are arranged. The amount of space devoted by the author to this part of his subject is an evidence of the extreme importance he attaches to it.

But the most striking feature of Bain's lessons in connection with prose, is his denunciation of essay-writing, and in this phrase—we are, so far as I can discover—to include all composition on the part of the pupil.

While Dr. Bain admits that essay-writing has some advantages, he declares it to be so utterly illogical and utterly unphilosophical as a school exercise, that its demerits far outweigh its benefits. The merits which he allows to exercises in composition are these: It makes the pupils develop their own powers; it turns their own resources to account; writing is prolific—a man does not know what he can do till he has a pen in his hand; an essay requires study and research. Still further, it puts in practice what has already been taught, and in such a form as to show the result of teaching.

This last consideration, which, to most teachers, will, I think, seem the important thing, is added by our author as if it were an afterthought, hardly worth mentioning, and it is this half-contemptuous way of speaking of the benefits of practice in composition that most astonishes the reader.

What, on the other hand, are the great demerits of composition which lead such a high authority as Dr. Bain to condemn it altogether as a school exercise?

The main objection, stated in general terms, is that it passes beyond the true province of the teacher of English.

Essay-writing is not merely an exercise in style; it is something more. The essay-writer has to find something to say as well as to say it. Sometimes this is easy—sometimes difficult. At any rate, it violates the great principle of education, "Do one thing at a time."

The author elaborates this objection to essay-writing on the ground of its being opposed to the principles of teaching. He says:—

"The teacher should not ask his pupils to do anything he has not led up to—has not clearly paved the way for."

"Test the pupil on your own teaching, and on nothing beyond. If you depart from this, you open the door for all manner of abuse."

"The English teacher cannot give the information to write themes on subjects specially assigned."

"Pupils must either follow some authority, or repeat commonplaces."

This objection has a certain amount of force. It is true we must not use composition exercises as a means of teaching geography, or history, or science. But it seems to me that to allow pupils, in an English class, to be altogether without practice in composition is far more directly opposed to the logic of teaching. The objection of Dr. Bain may to some extent be removed if we ask our pupils to express in their own words only those ideas with which they are familiar. This is the line on which the teaching of the subject, according to the authorized programme, now proceeds.

I imagine there are few English teachers now so far behind the age as to require their pupils to write compositions on abstract and unfamiliar themes, as was once so generally the practice.

Besides, Dr. Bain overlooks the fact that verbal expression of thought is not a separate branch of knowledge, which a pupil may either take up or

dispense with at his pleasure. It is not an optional subject. By a higher authority even than the Education Department, it is obligatory. Some ideas the pupil must have, and these ideas he must express—if not in written, at least in spoken language. The principles that underlie these two forms of expression are largely identical, and applicable to both as vehicle of communication of thought.

In every branch of knowledge the pupil has to express in words the ideas he has received from his teachers, or his text-books, or his own mental operations. For the most part, this expression is oral; but in these days of abounding examinations, to put it on no higher ground, the art of written expression is to every pupil exceedingly valuable, and the proposition that readiness in it is worth cultivating hardly needs to be stated, much less proved.

The next subject is *Paraphrasing*—i.e., the changing of the form of prose. Of this Dr. Bain is somewhat more tolerant. Being merely a form of expression, it is allowed to be a suitable subject for an English teacher. But, although free from many of the defects of the essay, it still, in his opinion, conflicts with the principle previously quoted. It does not deal with things that have already been taught.

This objection he illustrates from the teaching of a foreign language, when the master, at any particular stage of the pupil's advancement, knows what vocabulary he has acquired, and demands this, and this only, in his practical work.

"It is different," he says, "with the English master, who is nowise responsible for the pupil's vocabulary, and the inference is plain. * * The pupil must not be asked by the English master to use his vocabulary."

"You cannot arrange a series of lessons such that paraphrasing is the legitimate sequence of these lessons."

"You call pupils to account for other people's work, not for your own—by which, in my opinion, you are placed in an utterly wrong position."

"One exercise does not help the next: you plunge into a quagmire; each step is a new and distinct effort; you do not clear a path for further progress; you are off the rails of consecutive teaching."

"Downward paraphrase is objectionable. If a sentence cannot be improved, leave it untouched."

Some of these remarks sound strangely. Must the English master not ask the pupil to use any words he has not himself taught? If not, must the Mathematical master, or the Science master? How is the work of the school to go on? Language is the only means which can be used in giving and testing instruction, and whoever has given the vocabulary, every teacher must ask his pupils to use what vocables he has acquired, no matter when.

Dr. Bain, moreover, is, in his theory, somewhat at variance with his own practice in the analysis of sentences. In these he changes the order—he arranges and re-arranges words, and phrases, and clauses, and in many cases he acknowledges that the changes suggested are not improvements. If, then, it is a profitable exercise, to vary the order of construction in a sentence, even if the change is not for the better, will it not be profitable to vary the vocabulary—to paraphrase—even if the paraphrase is downward, provided, always, the pupil sees that it is downward, and why it is so?

The consideration of the paraphrasing of poetry, however, I shall defer till I come to the emotional qualities of style, to which it more properly belongs.

All Dr. Bain's study of English, both prose and poetry, may be summed up in the words of the High School curriculum—*Critical Reading*. He would take the passage as it stands, point out its various excellencies and defects, show why they are one or the other, so that the pupil by this study and examination of good models and bad models, continued for a considerable time, may, in the case of prose, be at last enabled to rise to some power of imitating the excellencies with which he has grown familiar. But so far as we can gather from this book, he would not have the English student—at least while he remains at school, a member of a large class—proceed to put his newly

*Read before the Modern Language Association of Ontario.