

English.

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THE FUNCTION OF ENGLISH POETRY IN THE HIGH SCHOOL.*

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"Poetry is itself a thing of God ;
He made His prophets poets, and the more
We feel of poesie do we become
Like God in love and power—under-makers."

I have followed with considerable interest some of the many learned discussions that have risen, have fallen, and have decayed, concerning the relative educational importance of the various subjects on our High School curriculum. While sympathetically hearing a brother teacher dolefully lament that arithmetical genius was discounted in favor of algebraic talent, or that mathematical studies were cramped, owing to heavy pressure from science and classics; while wonderingly listening to an enthusiastic friend, as he told in winged words of the absolute necessity of instructing the growing youth in the universal truths of nature; while delightfully attending to the artless, artistic, æsthetic admirer of Greek and Latin, as he faultlessly demonstrated the unique mental effects of Homer and of Virgil on the much crammed, but not, therefore, more educated child of this most enlightened age; while admiringly smiling, as I heard the sweet sounds of *der, die, das*, or of *jai, tu as, il a*, lisped by pretty girls and gallant boys; while carefully noting that the art of recording, in a systematic manner, the transactions of merchants, traders, and other persons engaged in pursuits connected with money, and that the art of representing any object by means of lines circumscribing its boundaries, and the art of delineating, on a plane surface near and distant objects as they appear to the eye from any given distance, were attracting a great deal of attention, due, perhaps, to the mercantile spirit of our busy, bustling century, could I help blissfully thinking that while with regard to the various subjects of High School study much might be said on all sides among English-speaking people, among loyal British subjects, among patriotic Canadians, among educated, broad-cultured Torontonians, the study of English poetical literature was still universally recognized as a means of educating the emotional, the intellectual, and the æsthetic side of our nature? Am I not right in concluding that every zealous mathematician, every painstaking natural philosopher, every cultured Greek, every devoted admirer of French and German, every busy commercial master, wishes to have all pupils instructed in English verse? All believe with Coleridge that "Poetry is the blossom and the fragrance of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotion, language"; and, with Leigh Hunt, "Poetry is the breath of beauty, flowing around the spiritual world, as the winds that wake up the flowers do about the material."

It is still a fact that a nation's greatness is measured by its literature, and it is readily granted that the chief kind of literature is poetry. Now, if my memory serves me properly, in mathematics a function is defined as a quantity so connected with another that no change can be made in the latter without producing a corresponding change in the former. It follows that poetical literature is the function of every nation. What is true of the nation is, in this case, true of the individual. The function, the power of English poetry in our High Schools, is to make our boys great men, our girls great women, by cheering, by refining, by ennobling. I do not claim that a student's greatness is measured by his love of English classic poetry, but heartily agree with Van Dyke: "I had rather have my children grow up thinking that the earth is flat, and that light is a liquid, than have them grow up without a love for true poetry."

In order to explain this function of English poetry in our High Schools, let me make a four-fold division of High School pupils: First, those below the Primary; second, the Primary Form;

third, the Junior Leaving and Pass Matriculation Form; fourth, the Senior Leaving and Honor Matriculation Form.

The poetry studied by the first division consists of selections from the High School Reader, and of selections chosen by the teacher. As all tastes are not alike it would be difficult, if not impossible, to collect such a number of English classics as would please every teacher and every pupil; for, be it gratefully recorded, every teacher is original enough to be different from all others. What is true of the teacher is, in this case, true of the pupil, for teachers are but pupils of a supposed larger growth; of course, mental growth.

The High School Reader contains a good, suggestive selection that is easily supplemented as taste directs, and as opportunity presents itself; so that it is a pleasure to know that as all such classes are differently constituted, that is, consist of different teachers, the supplemental work is likely not the same.

In this junior form, we find that the boys prefer the poems that have to do with wars; the girls show a marked liking for interesting narratives and picturesque descriptions. Yet, very often these likings are reversed. Indeed, each pupil is like a note of a new musical instrument. You may succeed in striking several notes together; you may strike one at a time; the aim is to strike all at some time, and the oftener the better. Then is heard the echo that will "roll from soul to soul, and grow forever and forever."

We feel sure that when a child is taught to see good actions, good principles, good morals, and whether in the cornfield, the daisied field, or the battlefield; in the cottage, the residence, or the palace; in the ploughman, the esquire, or the lord—he will admire, will applaud, will imitate, in his own scale. You watch him translate the lesson to suit his own circumstances, when he tells you what he thinks, what he would do. You see him become a part of all that he meets.

In a word, you have given the child an intellectual problem to solve, or an intellectual theorem to demonstrate; you have, from the nature of the problem or theorem, aroused his emotions, his human feelings; you have presented the question in an æsthetic form, and have stimulated his sense of the beautiful. What would you more?

You believe that true poets are "God's prophets of the Beautiful." Could we not present to our junior class its specimens of the Beautiful in a more æsthetic form than in homely brown-covered books, dubbed High School Readers—not even Poetic Literatures? Why not have our classic gems printed on good paper, and bound in an attractive cover? Then, with Disraeli, one might say,

"Object of delicious pleasures!
You my eyes rejoicing please,
You my hands in rapture seize."

As it is, when asking for the High School Reader for a Literature lesson, I say, "Let us take our Poetic Literature." Mere sentiment, you may, perhaps, conclude; but then I smile at the well-known French writer as he whispers, "All the reasonings of men are not worth one sentiment of women!"

Yet another sentiment, to which I beg to give expression. Every High School teacher, except the teacher of English Poetical Literature—here he is always excepted—is wont to demand those same brown-covered High School Readers whenever an imposition is to be given. What fate impels the choice of poetic selections? Does the child love the rod that punishes, even if that rod be of gold? If familiarity with a poem ever breeds contempt for it, it must inevitably be when that familiarity is acquired by an hour's irksome, fruitless scribbling while companions are with the tennis-racket or the football. The longer the poem, the greater the contempt. The pupil is not in the humor to help Horatius keep the bridge, or to understand by what right Shylock claims the pound of flesh; he prefers to croak, with the Raven, "Nevermore!" We agree that "the object of punishment is prevention from evil; it can never be made impulsive to good." Here, assuredly, "correction lieth in those hands which made the fault."

Let me conclude with three pleasures known by the teacher of poetical literature in this junior work: the pleasure experienced when told of poems read by pupils outside of school work; the pleasure of always having the memorization of

extracts done voluntarily; the pleasure in examining what the world calls "Spring poetry." If often springs from the heart.

The brown-covered High School Reader contains the selected course for candidates for the Primary Departmental Examination. A pupil sometimes says, "The English Poetical Literature is still the same." There is evinced a feeling of monotony. I have heard more than one teacher say, "I do not blame the pupil." Is it not true that if the teacher does not weary of the poems—verily, weak humanity wearies of even the sweetest songs—the pupils will not weary, whatever the feelings expressed at the beginning of the session? Is not Carlyle right? "If time is precious, no book that will not improve by repeated readings deserves to be read at all." It seems best not to specialize too early in one's course. It is surely better to know a little of the best of several authors than a little more of only one.

By the Primary Examination, the first official test is given to the pupil's work. This the pupil knows. He has grown a year or two years; his thoughts, his joys, his cares have grown; the poems have grown with him. They are still the same tunes, but with different tones. The teacher sets the tones. It used to be considered necessary to have the same chorus for every poem—"Look out for the examiners!" I have heard, the teachers sang the chorus with might and main. Now our pupils learn their poems; think them, feel them, act them. They memorize just what they like. Their little tastes are pure. Love of the work is our only impetus. At the end of the school year they tell the examiners what is asked, and usually please. I may say plainly, I have never taught one lesson that pandered to an examiner's taste. Teach, and never think of examiners as dreaded monsters. Examiners are merely questioners. Fellow-teachers, the fever of examinations is too often contracted by teachers, and is then caught by pupils.

At Christmas time of 1894 I had a Poetical Examination in a primary form, and asked the question, "Do you like the study of poetry? Tell briefly why or why not." Let me give you a sample of the replies. That I might not select partially, I chose at random, yet I need not conceal the fact that all answered affirmatively. This from a boy: "Yes, I like the study of poetry, because it brings before my mind in a way that neither prose, nor painting, nor music, nor aught I know can, the beauty and grandeur of nature. It tells sweet tales of love, it draws sweet pictures of characters of good men and women, and fills a man with that emotion and strength which says, I will rise and become better and stronger." This from a pupil with less power of expression: "I like the study of poetry because it makes me think. The most of poetry leads me to higher thoughts. Poetry is a fine study; the more you know of it, the more you want to know." Another: "I like the study of poetry because it teaches truth and points out evil; so that, by knowing what and where the evil is, we may avoid it. Also it appeals to the feelings, and affords more food for thought than any other single subject. I think that the study of poetry advances a man farther in wisdom than any other study except history."

In case any of my hearers should agree with the last statement, I leave all to argue it with Plato, who writes: "Poetry comes nearer the vital truth than does history."

I have a good many of such answers, and, with these testimonies, may we not say to the learned critic that writes in THE EDUCATIONAL JOURNAL of March 15, 1895, and who asserts that in the High Schools of the United States, "Literature—I hate it" sums up the judgment of too many boys and girls in this matter, such a hatred is unknown in our Canadian High Schools?

In the Junior Leaving and Pass Matriculation form there is a feeling of importance on the first morning after the summer holidays, when is announced the poet whose work is to be of particular study. There is magic in the name of Scott, Wordsworth, Tennyson. It is as though a renowned personage—and at the same time a friend—was come to spend a year and promised to tell throughout the whole year of glad tidings.

We agree that the teachers and the pupils of Ontario are indebted to those learned annotators that have prepared special editions of particular authors for the Junior Leaving and Pass Matriculation students. I should like to express the wish that future annotators provide as dainty a volume

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