

Notes on Third Class Literature.

THE ISLES OF GREECE—BY BYRON.

BY WILLIAM BURNS, B.A., FIRST PROV. (ENG.),
ST. CATHARINES COLLEGIATE INSTITUTE.

In order to enter into the spirit of this piece, the reader must remember that Byron supposes himself to be a modern Greek, well versed in the ancient history of his country, and imbued with a large share of patriotic fervor, comparing the feelings and actions of the modern race with those of their ancestors, to the manifest disadvantage of the former. The energy and spirit of the writer are visible in every line of this poem, and the changes of thought are most vivid. Let us endeavor to trace the course of thought. The writer contemplates first the ancient literary glories of Greece, in the persons of Sappho, Homer, Anacreon; then its military and naval honors as typified by Marathon and Salamis; turning his thoughts he asks where have all these glories now vanished, and expresses his shame at modern degeneracy. He feels, however, that there is yet one thing in which the modern Greek can compete with the ancient, that is fondness for wine and dancing, thus giving a very satirical kind of praise to his own times. Then supposing himself answered by one of his hearers, that Anacreon drank and wrote divine songs, but was yet a subject of a tyrant, he replies that even then, the tyrant was a Greek, implying that however submissive or tyrannical a Greek might be, yet he would never submit to a foreign despot. He sees one ray of light in the dark picture of degradation, namely, that the Suliotes were striving to imitate the patriotic deeds of their forefathers. The other Greeks were trusting to foreign aid; this latter he considers as a false hope, and pities the future of his country dependent on such expectations. He desires at last to go to the furthest extremity of the land, to Sunium, and there to end his days. We may put two constructions on this last stanza; either it may imply that the speaker would rather die than live a slave to tyranny and pleasure, or that he had resolved his native land should no more be a land of slaves, and this aim was only to be attained by casting aside all luxury or pleasure until liberty was gained.

The chief literary merits of this poem consist in—

1. Accuracy of allusion; as in—

“Of the three hundred grant but three,
To make a new Thermopylæ.”

2. Energy of expression; as in—

“You have the letters Cadmus gave,
Think ye he meant them for a slave?”

3. Use of vision; as in—

“Hark! rising to the ignoble call,
How answers each bold Bacchanal.”

4. Use of interrogation and apostrophe; as in—

“What, silent still? and silent all?”

“Earth! render back from out thy breast
A remnant of our Spartan dead!”

thus rendering the picture much more vivid than could be done by any other means.

No teacher or student, in going over this eloquent poem, will omit to look carefully at the classical words and names used, as without a careful attention to them the sense will be very indistinct. He will notice also the forcible ideas in “Where grew the arts of war and peace,” as true of their gradual rise, as it is poetical in imagination, and historically correct, of the gradual progress and ultimate excellence of the Greeks in all things relating to war and the fine arts of sculpture, painting, architecture, etc. “Echo,” very expressive of the knowledge we now have of their arts and skill—not a perfect conception, but in many cases only a mere echo of the reality. “Could,” notional force of verb can; *i. e.*, I was quite unable, I knew not how, etc. “Degenerate,” partly the root-idea of come down by inheritance; partly of the secondary idea of weakened force. “Ignoble call,” forcible contrast with the “noble call” to the Spartans to die for their country at Thermopylæ. “Tyrant,” giving the exact primary idea of the word, namely, a usurper of absolute power, without any allusion to the abuse of such power. “Might own,” in reference to the Spartan mothers disowning a son who had shown cowardice on the field of battle, and to the common advice given by the Doric women in handing the shield to the warrior on his start for war—“On it, or with it.” “Marbled,” possibly in reference to the general geological formation of Greece, or to the “marbled” pillars; the remains of a temple upon it. “Save,” from *N. F. sauf*, became confused with *A. S. verb save* of somewhat similar signification.

This piece finally furnishes us with a noble picture of patriotic thought and feeling; although in it Byron did not apparently fully appreciate the Greek character of his days, nor the results of centuries of oppression on national character.

Notes on Entrance Literature.

NATIONAL MORALITY—JOHN BRIGHT.

ONE scarcely knows which to admire most in this extract, the nervous force and simple grace of the style, or the nobility of the sentiments. The former qualities are sure to make themselves felt, but it will also be for the teacher to guide the pupils in their efforts to analyze the more striking passages, and find out the secret of their power. Help them to observe, for instance, the happy alternation of long and short sentences, which charms the ear, challenges constant attention, and relieves the style from the dullness of monotony. The first three sentences in the extract are terse, vigorous, and purely declarative. The fourth is lengthy, complex, has modifying clauses of varying lengths, yet is perfectly clear, even to a child. The same contrast may be observed between the fifth and sixth sentences, and so on throughout. It must not be supposed, of course, that in this way we discover a part of a plan upon which the speech is artfully constructed. It is rather a natural order into which the good taste and oratorical skill of the speaker led him almost without conscious premeditation. And yet, no doubt, the best speakers and writers often find it possible to improve their productions by the semi-mechanical device of breaking up a sentence here, and combining two or three there, to save them from the monotonous effect produced by a

succession of sentences of nearly uniform length. Another quality which contributes much to the pleasing effectiveness of Bright's speeches, is the occurrence of chaste and appropriate tropes and other figures of speech. Study, for example, “The nation in every country dwells in the cottage,” “Unless the light of your constitution can shine there,” “The wealth we expend in sacrifices to the old scimitar,” “We have beacons, we have landmarks enough,” etc. Note also the hyperbolic, but forcible, enumeration of particulars in such sentences as, “the expenditure of every shilling, the engagement of every man, the employment of every ship.”

But here, as everywhere,—and this is a truth that cannot be too emphatically insisted on—the main source of eloquence and power is to be found in the *thoughts* and *sentiments* expressed. Apart from striking thoughts and noble sentiments there can be no true eloquence. By means of these the roughest style may be made powerful and thrilling. In all speaking and writing, the first, the paramount, the indispensable pre-requisite, is to have something to say worth saying. We do not hold that a pupil should make no attempt at writing until he has first learned to think. That would be equivalent to saying that he should not enter the water until he has learned to swim. Every boy and girl has thoughts and feelings which are more or less worthy of expression, and in the act and effort of expression is usually found the very best means of quickening and enlarging the thinking power.

It does not seem necessary to occupy space here with explanations of difficult words, historical and mythological allusions, etc., those being dealt with in the notes at the end of the Reader, and in the “Companion.” Two or three somewhat obscure sentences in the extract before seem, however, to claim attention. For remarks upon one or two of these the reader is referred to “Queries and Notes,” on another page. It may be suggested, in passing, that the competent teacher will do well in connection with such passages as those on page 296, commencing, “What are our contributions?” and “Two nights ago,” to point out, in regard to the first, the tremendous present force of the comparison there instituted, in view of the enormous expenditures of European nations of the present day in military equipments—an expenditure which is on a scale that would have seemed almost incredible at the date of Mr. Bright's address, thirty years ago; and, in regard to the second, the great change wrought since that date, by the extension of the franchise to millions who had then no political power.

Page 297. *I am speaking, too.* Whose are the “finer instincts” and “purer minds” referred to? What does Mr. Bright mean by saying these have not suffered, etc.? Are there any tendencies in the direction of a change?

The next sentence is made obscure by bad punctuation. The construction and meaning would be made clear, and the whole would be more in Mr. Bright's style, were it re-cast in sentences, and punctuated as follows:—

“You can mould opinion. You can create political power. You cannot think a good thought on this subject and communicate it to your neighbors, you cannot make these points topics of discussion in your social circles and more general meetings—without affecting sensibly and speedily, etc.” Perhaps the dash is unnecessary, and should be replaced with a comma. Many minor points in punctuation are matters of taste, yet there are general principles in regard to it, whose observance is of great importance in the expression of thought.