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CONTENTS OF CURRENT NUMBER.

	PAGE
CAN ENGLISH LITERATURE BE TAUGHT?.....	19
WHOM THE GODS LOVE (Poem).....	20
THE MONARCHY IN THE JUBILEE YEAR.....	20
LONDON LETTER.....	21
LYRICAL TRANSLATIONS.....	22
THE BODY TO THE SOUL (Poem).....	22
READINGS FROM CURRENT LITERATURE.....	23
TOPICS—	
The Customs Union Scheme.....	24
Divorce Cases and the Senate.....	24
Protestant Universities in Quebec.....	24
Temperance and the Biblical Argument.....	24
State Legislation and the Northern Pacific.....	24
Liberty of Speech in Britain and the United States.....	24
Macaulay on a Parliament in Dublin.....	24
The Unionists of Ulster.....	24
International Arbitration.....	25
The Election of M. Sadi-Carnot.....	25
The Character of the New President.....	25
The Boycott of M. Grévy.....	25
Jacob Sharp's Successful Appeal.....	25
Science and Religion.....	25
DARWIN'S LIFE AND WORK.....	26
OUR LIBRARY TABLE.....	27
LITERARY GOSSIP.....	28
CHESS.....	28

CAN ENGLISH LITERATURE BE TAUGHT?

OUR young Dominion in the present stage of its existence resembles much in disposition and activity the character of a young man on the eve of reaching maturity. Impatient of restraint, bold almost to rashness in the consciousness of physical and mental strength, self-assertive and confident, we are apt to belittle the experience of more sedate nations, to "dare to stand alone," to "vaunt ourselves in ourselves sufficient." We—like all precocious youths—search for first principles, and thinking we have found them, hastily proceed to construct upon them new methods and systems. In politics this is apparent. We have determined for ourselves how we shall be governed, and how we shall trade. We have discussed amongst ourselves *ab initio* Confederation *versus* separate provinces, free trade *versus* protection, and all the various details of Confederate, Provincial, and municipal government; and if some of us are not satisfied with the results, at least all of us are satisfied with the independent method by which we reached those results.

In educational matters this self-sufficiency is even more apparent. We have in a short term of years built up an elaborate system of public instruction, which if it is not the admiration is the wonder of older countries. We have settled for ourselves who shall teach, who shall learn, what shall be taught, and who shall pay for the teaching. We have solved off-hand such intricate and delicate problems as the co-education of the sexes and the non-co-education of the sects; we have drawn a definite line of demarcation between those two highly vague and indefinite things called "secular education," and "religious education;" we have regulated the exact amount of Scripture that shall be read in our schools, when it shall be read, and how it shall be read; we have made up our minds as to the feasibility of implanting habits of temperance and hygiene by inculcating theories of temperance and hygiene; we have created or compiled our own text-books on almost every subject, from English history to physical culture, from bookkeeping to blow-pipe analysis; and if we have not yet decided whether we shall teach our youth sewing or cookery or joining or any such purely sublunary subjects, at least we have decided that they may learn singing and botany and literature. Our school curriculum, indeed, resembles the solar spectrum more than it resembles anything else. It can only be wholly comprehended by one who, if he has not his head among the clouds, has his thoughts among the stars. It embraces almost every known description of the light of knowledge, it is the subject of incessant and interminable wrangling, and almost yearly are added to it some vague and dim ultra-violet sort of rays, such as *précis* writing, the decalogue, or the action of alcohol. Truly if nothing else proved our youthful confidence and vigour this curriculum would suffice.

One of the subjects of this variegated curriculum has had for some time past concentrated upon it the searching and critical gaze of many of our theoretical and practical teachers. English literature, whether, how, and why it ought to be taught, is at present a sort of *campus philosophorum*. It certainly deserves the widest discussion. But few will be found to deny that it already occupies an important place in our schools if not in our universities; and in a country where the same close attention is not given to classics which is given to them in the Motherland, there is a

possibility if not a probability that English literature will one day be looked to as a substitute for this time-honoured branch of learning.

There is in the November number of the *Nineteenth Century* a very admirable article, with the title which heads this paper, by J. Churton Collins. If the teachers of our young and precocious Dominion do not mind getting a hint or two from an Old World authority, Mr. Collins may be found to have something to say worth listening to. I purpose giving here a short outline of his suggestions.

He is the one of those who thoroughly believes in the importance of English literature and deplors the present system of teaching it. "Among all the anomalies in which the history of education abounds," he says, "it would be difficult to find one more extraordinary than our present system of teaching, and legislating for the teaching, of English literature. The importance of that subject, both from a positive point of view as a branch of knowledge and from an educational point of view as an instrument of culture, is so fully recognised that its study is everywhere encouraged.

To all appearance, indeed, there is no branch of education in a more flourishing condition or more full of promise for the future. But, unhappily, this is very far from being the case. In spite of its great vogue, and in spite of the time and energy lavished in teaching it, no fact is more certain than that from an educational point of view it is, and from the very first has been, an utter failure. Teachers perceive with perplexity that it attains none of the ends which a subject in itself so full of attraction and interest might be expected to attain. It fails, they complain, to fertilise; it fails to inform; it fails even to awaken curiosity. For a dozen youths who derive real benefit from the instruction they get in preparing for an examination in history, there are not two who derive the smallest benefit from the instruction they get in preparing for an examination in literature. . . . No one who has had experience in examining can have failed to be struck by the differences between the answers sent in to questions on English literature and the answers sent in to questions on other subjects. In a paper on literature the questions designed to test intelligence and judgment will as a rule be carefully avoided, or if attempted prove only too conclusively the absence of both; but questions involving no more than can be attained by the unreflective exercise of memory will be answered with a fluency and fulness which is often miraculous." He then proceeds to seek for the causes of this barrenness in the teaching of literature in the following words:

Since its recognition as a subject of teaching it has been taught wherever it has been seriously taught on the same principle as the classics. It has been regarded not as the expression of art and genius, but as mere material for the study of words, as a mere pabulum for philology. All that constitutes its intrinsic value has been ignored. All that constitutes its value as a liberal study has been ignored. Its masterpieces have been resolved into exercises in grammar, syntax, and etymology. Its history has been resolved into a barren catalogue of names, works, and dates. No faculty but the faculty of memory has been called into play in studying it. That it should therefore have failed as an instrument of education is no more than might have been expected.

The most interesting part of this interesting article, however, is that in which the writer states his own practical views as to how this state of things can best be remedied. "In legislating for the teaching of English literature," he proceeds, "and the term literature needs no definition, we have obviously to bear two things in mind—the necessity for an adequate treatment of it from an historical point of view, and the necessity for an adequate treatment of it from a critical point of view." He considers none of the commonly used text-books as of much value for a comprehensive historical study of English literature. Taine he thinks brilliant but sketchy, Morley limited too much to names and titles, Chambers (*Encyclopædia of English Literature*) a mere manual, and Craik and Shaw simply hand books. He himself would recommend "a series of volumes corresponding to each of the periods into which the history of our literature naturally divides itself, each period being treated separately in detail, but each being linked by historical disquisitions both with the period immediately preceding and with the period immediately following. And each volume should consist of four parts. Its prologue, which should be virtually the epilogue of its predecessor, should, after assigning the determining dates of the particular period under treatment, show how, in obedience to the causes which regulate the course and phases of literary activity, the literature characteristic of the preced-