

Oral Expression and the Teaching of Literature in the High School

J. J. BAKER, M.A.
High School, Calgary

IN discussing briefly this topic it is in order, perhaps, to state that by teaching literature I do not mean any formal study of words, except in so far as such study is absolutely necessary to the understanding of the text itself. I mean rather that use of the selection which will bring the student, as far as his limited life experience will permit, into the mood in which the author himself was. It does not matter what the predominating characteristic of this mood is. It may be highly intellectual, or it may be highly something else.

In Alberta we have placed in the introduction to our course in literature the statement that during the first and second years attention must be given to oral reading and that students are to have instruction in the general laws of oral expression, and in voice training where necessary. At present I confess that this direction may be largely "in abeyance". In the whole province we have less than half a dozen teachers whose time is mainly given to teaching literature. It may be well for us to have ideals even if we do not attain to them by a single bound. We are not demanding the impossible. Experience shows that most of the pupils in Grade IX are quite capable of appreciating these general laws. Of course here, as in other departments, some will be discouragingly slow, but others will be surprisingly quick. Take for example the laws of inflection. Appeal to the pupil's knowledge of child life in order that he may discover a real principle underlying the directions you are giving him. If he has little brothers or sisters at home so much the better. His observations will surely help him to learn when to use the rising and when the falling inflection in his oral work. The pupil will gain much by continuing and extending his observations in connection with the instructions given. He may note not only the natural expression of children, but he can observe the work of good readers and speakers. And so without spending much extra time a fairly good foundation for correct oral expression may be laid.

Every teacher of literature ought to have training in oral expression. I do not use the word elocution, simply because in some quarters the word is in disrepute and perhaps not without good reason. The so-called friends of elocution have often been the worst enemies of true culture. The statement made does not say that the teacher who has