

# TALKS ON TEACHING LITERATURE

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THESE Talks are founded upon lectures delivered before the Summer School of the University of Illinois in June, 1905. The interest which was shown in the subject and in the views expressed encouraged me to state rather more elaborately and in book form what I felt in regard to a matter which is certainly of great importance, and concerning which so many teachers are in doubt. I wish here to express my obligation to Assistant-Professor Henry G. Pearson, who has very kindly gone over the manuscript, and to whom I am indebted for suggestions of great value.

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# TALKS ON TEACHING LITERATURE

## I

### THE PROBLEM

FEW earnest teachers of literature have escaped those black moments when it seems perfectly evident that the one thing sure in connection with the whole business is that literature cannot be taught. If they are of sensitive conscience they are likely to have wondered at times whether it is honest to go on pretending to give instruction in a branch in which instruction is so obviously impossible. The more they consider, the more evident it is that if a pupil really learns anything *in* literature, — as distinguished from learning *about* literature, — he does it himself; and they cannot fail to see that as an art literature necessarily partakes of the nature of all art, the quality of being inexpressible and unexplainable in any language except its own.

The root of whatever difficulty exists in fulfilling the requirements of modern courses of training which have to do with literature is just this fact. Any art, as has been said often and often, exists simply and solely because it embodies and conveys what can be adequately expressed in no

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other form. A picture or a melody, a statue or a poem, gives delight and inspiration by qualities which could belong to nothing else. To teach painting or music or literature is at best to talk about these qualities. Words cannot express what the work or art expresses, or the work itself would be superfluous; and the teacher of literature is therefore apparently confronted with the task of endeavoring to impart what language itself cannot say.

So stated the proposition seems self-contradictory and absurd. Indeed it too often happens that in actual practice it is so. Teachers weary their very souls in necessarily fruitless endeavors to achieve the impossible, and fail in their work because they have not clearly apprehended what they could effect and what they should determine to effect. In any instruction it is of great importance to recognize natural and inevitable limitations, and nowhere is this more true than in any teaching which has to do with the fine arts. In other branches failure to perceive the natural restrictions of the subject limits the efficiency of the teacher; in the arts it not only utterly vitiates all work, but it gives students a fundamentally wrong conception of the very nature of that with which they are dealing.

In most studies the teacher has to do chiefly with the understanding, or, to put it more exactly, with the intellect of the pupil. In dealing with literature he must reckon constantly with the emotions also. If he cannot arouse the feelings and

the imaginations of his students, he does not succeed in his work. Not only is this difficult in itself, but it calls for an emotional condition in the instructor which is not easily combined with the didactic mood required by teaching ; a condition, moreover, which begets a sensitiveness to results much more keen than any disappointment likely to be excited by failure to carry a class triumphantly through a lesson in arithmetic or history. This sensitiveness constantly brings discouragement, and this in turn leads to renewed failure. In work which requires the happiest mood on the part of the teacher and the freest play of the imagination, the consciousness of any lack of success increases the difficulty a hundredfold. The teacher who is able by sheer force of determination to manage the stupidities of a dull algebra class, may fail signally in the attempt to make the same force carry him through an unappreciated exercise in "Macbeth." It is true that no teaching is effective unless the interest as well as the attention of the pupils is enlisted ; but whereas in other branches this is a condition, in the case of literature it is a prime essential.

The teaching of literature, moreover, is less than useless if it is not educational as distinguished from examinational. It is greatly to be regretted that necessity compels the holding of examinations at all in a subject of which the worth is to be measured strictly by the extent to which it inspires the imagination and develops the charac-

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ter of the student. Any system of examinations is likely to be at best a makeshift made inevitable by existing conditions, and it is rendered tolerable only where teachers — often at the expense, under present school methods, of a stress of body and of soul to be appreciated only by those who have taught — are able to mingle a certain amount of education with the grinding drill of routine work. Examination papers hardly touch and can hardly show the results of literary training which are the only excuse for the presence of this branch in the school curriculum. Every faithful worker who is trying to do what is best for the children while fulfilling the requirements of the official powers above him is face to face with the fact that the tabulated returns of intermediates and finals do not in the least represent his best or most laboriously achieved success.

Under these conditions it is not strange that so many teachers are at a loss to know what they are expected to do or what they should attempt to do. If the teachers in the secondary schools of this country were brought together into some Palace of Truth where absolute honesty was forced upon them, it would be interesting and perhaps saddening to find how few could confidently assert that they have clear and logical ideas in regard to the teaching of literature. They would all be able to say that they dealt with certain specified books because such work is a prominent part of the school requirement; and many would, unless restrained by

the truth-compelling power of their environment, add vague phrases about broadening the minds of the children. A pitiful number would be forced to confess that they had no clear conception of what they were to do beyond loading up the memories of the luckless young folk with certain dead information about books to be unloaded at the next examination, and there left forever. Too often "broadening the mind" of the young is simple flattening it out by the dead weight of lifeless and worthless fact.

This uncertainty in regard to what they are to do and how they are to do it is constantly evident in the complaints and inquiries of teachers. "How would you teach 'Macbeth'?" one asked me. "Do you think the sources of the plot should be thoroughly mastered?" Another wrote me that she had always tried to make the moral lesson of "Silas Marner" as clear and strong as possible, but that one of her boys had called her attention to the fact that no question on such a matter had ever appeared in the college entrance examination papers, and that she did not know what to do. A third said frankly that she could never see what there was in literature to teach, so she just took the questions suggested by a text-book and confined her attention to them. If these seem extreme cases, it is chiefly because they are put into words. Certainly the number of instructors who are virtually in the position of the third teacher is by no means small.



Even the editors of "school classics" are sometimes found to be no more enlightened than those they profess to aid, and not infrequently seem more anxious to have credit for doing a scholarly piece of work than to make a book fitted for actual use. The devices they recommend for fixing the attention and enlightening the darkness of children in literary study are numerous; but not infrequently they are either ludicrous or pathetic. A striking example is that conspicuously futile method, the use of symbolic diagrams. The attempt to represent the poetry, the pathos, the passion of "The Merchant of Venice" or "Romeo and Juliet" by a diagram like a proposition in geometry seems to me not only the height of absurdity, but not a little profane. I have examined these cryptic combinations of lines, tangents, triangles, and circles, with more bewilderment than comprehension, I confess; generally with irritation; and always with the profound conviction that they could hardly be surpassed as a means of producing confusion worse confounded in the mind of any child whatever. Other schemes are only less wild, and while excellent and helpful text-books are not wanting, not a few show evidence that the writers were as little sure of what they were trying to effect, or of how it were best effected, as the most bewildered teacher who might unadvisedly come to them for enlightenment.

Instruction in literature as it exists to-day in the common schools of this country is almost al-

ways painstaking and conscientious ; but it is by no means always intelligent. The teachers who resort to diagrams are sincerely in earnest, and no less faithful are those who at the expense of most exhausting labor are dragging classes through the morass of questions suggested by the least desirable of school editions of college requirements. They dose their pupils with notes as Mrs. Squeers dosed the poor wretches at Dotheboys Hall with brimstone and treacle. The result is much the same in both cases.

“ Oh ! Nonsense,” rejoined Mrs. Squeers. . . . “ They have brimstone and treacle, partly because if they had n’t something or other in the way of medicine they ’d be always . . . giving a world of trouble, and partly because it spoils their appetites, and comes cheaper than breakfast and dinner.”

Certainly any child, no matter how great his natural appetite for literature, must find the desire greatly diminished after a dose of text-book notes.

The difficulties of teachers in handling this branch of instruction have been increased by the system under which work must be carried on. The tremendous problem of educating children in masses has yet to be solved, and it is at least doubtful if it can be worked out successfully without a very substantial diminution of the requirements now insisted upon. Certainly it is hardly conceivable that with the curriculum as crowded as it is at present any teacher could do much in the common schools with the teaching of literature.

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The pedagogic committees who have fixed the college entrance requirements, moreover, seem to have acted largely along conventional lines. In the third place the spirit of the time is out of sympathy with art, and the variety and insistence of outside calls on the attention and interest of the children make demands so great as to leave the mind dull to finer impressions. To the boy eager over football, the circus, and the automobile race he is to see when school is out, even an inspired teacher may talk in vain about Dr. Primrose, Lady Macbeth, or any other of the immortals. Ears accustomed to the strident measures of the modern street-song are not easily beguiled by the music of Milton, and yet the teacher of to-day is expected to persuade his flock that they should prefer "*L'Allegro*" to the vulgar but rollicking "*rag-time*" comic songs of dime-museum and alley. Under circumstances so adverse, it is not to be wondered at that teachers are not only discouraged but often bewildered.

What happens in many cases is sufficiently well shown by this extract from a freshman composition, in which the writer frankly gives an account of his training in English literature in a high school not twenty-five miles from Boston:

Very special attention was paid to the instruction of the classics as to what the examinations require. As closely as possible the faculty determine the scope of the examinations, and the class is drilled in that work especially. Examination papers are procured for sev-

eral years back, and are given to the students as regular high school examinations, and as samples of the kind of questions to be expected. The instructors notice especial questions that are often repeated in examination papers, warn the pupils of them, and even go so far as to estimate when the question will be used again. I have heard in the classroom, "This question was given three years ago, and it is about due again. They ask it every three or four years."

Another boy wrote, in the same set of themes, that he had taken the examination in the autumn, and added :

On the June examinations I noticed that there was nothing about Milton, so I studied Milton with heart and soul.

Here we find stated plainly what everybody connected with teaching knows to be common, and indeed what under the present system is almost inevitable. I know of many schools of no inconsiderable standing where in all branches old examination papers, if not used as the text-books, are at least the actual guide to all work done in the last year of fitting for college. This is perhaps only human, and it is easy to understand ; but it certainly is not education, and of that fact both students and teachers are entirely well aware. All this I say with no intention of blaming anybody for what is the result of difficult conditions. It is not well, however, to ignore what is perfectly well known, and what is one of the important difficulties of the situation.

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The problem, then, which confronts the teacher in the secondary school is twofold. He has to decide in the first place what the teaching of literature can and should legitimately accomplish, and in the second, by what means this may most surely and effectively be done. In a word, although work in this line has been going on multitudinously and confusedly for years, we are yet far from sufficiently definite ideas why and how literature should be taught to children.

## II

### THE CONDITIONS

THE inclusion of literature in the list of common school studies, however the original intent may have been lost sight of, was undoubtedly made in the interest of general culture. It is not certain that those who put it in had definite conceptions of methods or results, but unquestionably their idea was to aid the development of the children's minds by helping them to appreciate and to assimilate thoughts of nobility and of beauty, and by fostering a love for literature which should lead them to go on acquiring these from the masterpieces. How clear and well defined in the minds of educators this idea was it is needless to inquire. It is enough that it was undoubtedly sincere, and that it was founded on a genuine faith in the broadening and elevating influence of art.

The importance of literature as a means of mental development used to be taken for granted. Our fathers and grandfathers had for the classics a reverence which the rising generation looks back to as a phase of antiquated superstition, hardly more reasonable than the worship of sacred wells or a belief in goblins. So much stress is now laid

upon the tangible and the material as the only genuine values, that everything less obvious is discredited. The tendency is to take only direct results into consideration ; and influences which serve rather to elevate character than to aid in money-getting are at best looked upon with toleration.

That sense of mankind, however, which depends upon the perception of the few, and which in the long run forms the opinion of society in spite of everything, holds still to the importance of literature in any intelligent scheme of education. The popular disbelief makes enormously difficult the work of the teacher, but the force of the conviction of the wise minority keeps this branch in the schools. The sincere teacher, therefore, naturally tries to analyze effects, and to discern possibilities, in order to discover upon what facts the belief in the educational value of the study of literature properly rests.

The most obvious reasons for the study of literature may be quickly disposed of. It is well for a student to be reasonably familiar with the history of literature, with the names and periods of great writers. This adds to his chances of appearing to advantage in the world, and especially in that portion of society where he can least afford to be at a disadvantage. He is provided with facts about books and authors quite as much to protect him from the ill effects of appearing ignorant as for any direct influence this knowledge will have on his mind. Whatever the tendency of the times to

undervalue in daily life acquaintance with the more refined side of human knowledge, the fact remains that to betray ignorance in these lines may bring real harm to a person's social standing. Every one recognizes that among educated people a lad is better able to make his way if he does not confound the age of Shakespeare with that of Browning, and if he is able to distinguish between Edmund Spenser and Herbert Spencer. Such information may not be specially vital, but it is worth possessing.

Considerations of this sort, however, are evidently not of weight enough to account for the place of the study in the schools, and still less to excuse the amount of time and attention bestowed upon it. The same line of reasoning would defend the introduction of dancing, because

Those move easiest who have learned to dance.

More important and more far-reaching reasons must be found to satisfy the teacher, and to hearten him for the severe labor of working with class after class in the effort, not always successful, of arousing interest and enthusiasm over the writings which go by the name of English Classics. Some of these I may specify briefly. To deal with them exhaustively would take a book in itself, and would leave no room for the consideration of methods.

A careful and intelligent study of masterpieces of prose or verse, the teacher soon perceives, must



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develop greatly the student's sense of the value of words. This is not the highest function of this work, but it is by no means one to be despised. Literary study affords opportunities for training of this sort which are not to be found elsewhere ; and a sensitiveness to word-values is with a child the beginning of wisdom.

Children too often acquire and adults follow the habit of accepting words instead of ideas. A genuine appreciation of the worth of language is after all the chief outward sign of the distinction between the wise man and the dullard. One is content to receive speech as sterling coin, and the other perceives that words are but counters. If students could but appreciate the difference between apprehending and comprehending what they are taught, between learning words and assimilating ideas, the intellectual millennium would be at hand. Children need to learn that the sentence is after all only the envelope, only the vehicle for the thought. Everybody agrees to this theoretically, but practically the fact is generally ignored. The child is father to the man in nothing else more surely than in the trait of accepting in perfect good faith empty words as complete and satisfactory in themselves. The habit of being content with phrases once bred into a child can be eradicated by nothing short of severe intellectual surgery.

To say that words are received as sufficient in themselves and not as conveying ideas sounds like a paradox ; but there are few of us who may not at