The teaching of poetry in the high school

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THE
TEACHING OF POETRY
IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

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EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

There has lately been much criticism of the teaching of literature in the high school. It has been suggested, by those who have attempted to measure school work by its effect upon later life, that recent generations of high-school students have not gained all that they should from this study. They point out that we have been led to expect that twelve years of school contact with the best literature would establish an abiding interest in good reading; but we have found that high-school graduates, once they enter upon their life-work, give a surprisingly small part of their leisure time to reading of any sort, and still less to reading the world’s best literature.

It may be that this unsatisfactory result is not altogether new; that the school, without being aware of the fact, has always partially failed in its teaching of literary content. The boys and girls of the Latin schools and academies of the past years represented a highly selected population. As compared with the high-school students of to-day, they came of a favored cultured class.
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They did not exact of their teachers that skill in teaching literature which is now required. They came to the school with larger cultural backgrounds; and from the school they turned to a life among professional and social groups which sustained literary standards in reading, writing, and speech. Under such circumstances it was not natural for the schoolmaster to suspect that his teaching of literature was too formal, too exclusively intellectual, too feelingless; and that the home atmosphere sustained literary interest and taste in spite of ineffective teaching at school. It was, indeed, quite human for the teacher of traditional self-assurance to accept the result as a product of his own conscious workmanship, when in reality it had been accomplished by the unconscious, but none the less vital, influence of other agencies.

Such an attitude of self-confidence is no longer possible, because the pupils now in our schools come from homes of a different sort, and have to face altered working conditions. Great numbers of students now come to the classroom without a single tendency favorable to a literary interpretation of life; and they go forth to a commercial and industrial existence which is devoid of poetic feeling. For these, the school offers almost the
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sole opportunity for the development of literary taste. What the teacher does not inculcate, will, in most cases, never be achieved. Such a situation is likely to reveal, sometimes with startling suddenness, the futility of much of our formal, academic teaching of literature. When the teacher at last really perceives youth, dutifully but mechanically, gathering information about poets, poetic forms, and the themes of poetic composition, without once being fired with an intrinsic interest in poetry itself, he loses his assurance. At the same time he is a bit uncertain whether the way out of his difficulty is to be found in the reconstruction of his own teaching practice, or in frankly admitting that some students are doomed never to care about the poetic interpretation of human life.

There are a radical few who conclude that little can be done by aiming high, with, say, children of immigrants destined for industrial life, and who propose to do their best in refining such interests as they find among the youth they teach. In the high school they would put the emphasis on reading the current literature of the weeklies and monthlies, to the exclusion of real and abiding literature. In the elementary and evening schools they would teach reading from the trade-
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catalogues and daily newspapers. But for the most part the teachers who have become discontented with the present situation have sufficient intuition to sense the importance and universality of poetic values in life, and hence in education. They cannot welcome a program of reform which provides escape from responsibility by a kind of treason to the civilization of which they are the teaching representatives. They prefer to believe that the present situation requires no relinquishment of goals or standards, but merely the facing of a more difficult teaching problem with clearer vision and a more rational technique. From their point of view there is to be a readjustment of means without the compromise of ends. They are quite willing to begin their labors where they find them; but they are determined ultimately to develop an interest in those refined interpretations of life which come to men through the poetic energy. To them the present span of school life seems too limited an opportunity for even an approximately complete accomplishment. There is much to be done for those who have suffered cultural misfortune. Yet, even under such circumstances, the teacher feels that the chief thing is to leave a vital interest in poetic things, even though this obligation
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restrict in considerable degree, the types of literature enjoyed and studied in detail.

Having the faith of this group of teachers and thinkers, the editor has long wished for a discussion of the whole case of literature, more particularly poetry, in the high school. It is a singular good fortune that gives him the opportunity to present the monograph which follows.
"You might read all the books in the British Museum (if you could live long enough) and remain an utterly 'illiterate,' uneducated person; but if you read ten pages of a good book, letter by letter,—that is to say, with real accuracy,—you are forevermore in some measure an educated person. The entire difference between education and non-education (as regards the merely intellectual part of it) consists in this accuracy." — Ruskin.

"At school I enjoyed the inestimable advantage of a very sensible though at the same time a very severe master.... At the same time that we were studying Greek tragic poets, he made us read Shakespeare and Milton as lessons: and they were lessons, too, which required most time and trouble to 'bring up,' so as to escape his censure. I learned from him that poetry, even that of the loftiest and, seemingly, that of the wildest odes, had a logic of its own, as severe as that of science; and more difficult, because more subtle, more complex, and dependent upon more and more fugitive causes. 'In the truly great poets,' he would say, 'there is a reason assignable, not only for every word, but for the position of every word.'" — Coleridge.

"Of all our study the last end and aim should be to ascertain how a great writer or artist has served the life of man; to ascertain this, to bring home to ourselves as large a portion as may be of the gain wherewith he has enriched human life, and to render access to that store of wisdom, passion, and power, easier and surer for others. If our study does not directly or indirectly enrich the life of man, it is but a drawing of vanity with cart-ropes, a weariness to the flesh, or at best a busy idleness." — Edward Dowden.