THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS JOURNALS

ENGLISH IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Author(s): Francis B. Gummere

Source: *School and College*, February, 1892, Vol. 1, No. 2 (February, 1892), pp. 84-88
Published by: The University of Chicago Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/44375395

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *School and College*

JSTOR

This content downloaded from
203.99.157.59 on Mon, 25 Oct 2021 03:34:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

ENGLISH IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS.

THE object of a course in English at one of our good secondary schools should be twofold. We should teach the art, and we should teach the science. Ability to write clear and forcible English should be insisted upon for every graduate; and when this conceded end has been matched by adequate means, it will be as disgraceful for such a graduate to put together an absolutely slovenly or incorrect sentence as it would be for him to make errors in simple addition or multiplication. On the other hand, we should teach the science. This, again, must be divided into philology proper (linguistics in the narrower sense, that is: a satisfactory terminology in these matters does not exist, but is discussed at length by the late Professor Elze in his *Grundriss der englischen Philologie*, Halle, 1887, the first chapter), and literature. In this paper, I shall consider the study of English chiefly with regard to the reading of standard literature in higher classes. As to the philological study of our tongue, it would seem best to keep that separate from the study of literature proper. A brief primer, with the barest outlines of the history and elements of the language, made by a sound scholar who knows what to leave out as well as what to put in, should be placed in the hands of the upper class. I do not mean a handbook like the excellent manual prepared by Professor Lounsbury, — though by all means let such a book be studied, if time can be found for it, — but I have in mind a fraction of a primer, the merest skeleton, but holding the essential facts. Perhaps such a book exists, but I have not seen it. Prefaced by the facts contained in such a book, the instruction in English literature may be carried on strictly for its own sake. This is my present subject.

Literature, then, for its own sake is what we keep in mind as our objective point. The material that we study is not to be a peg on which we hang exercises in parsing or analysis, or what

This content downloaded from
203.99.157.59 on Mon, 25 Oct 2021 03:34:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

not; nor is it to be a mere rallying-place for gossip and instruction about things in general. Teufelsdröckh might carry on such a class to advantage; but for the average teacher its freedom is far too perilous. A man of discursive tendencies and a fairly wide range of reading sometimes atones for the centrifugal character of his teaching by opening a horizon for his pupils and spurring them on to private discoveries in the world of letters. But for the cheap showman and word-juggler we should have no mercy. This person brings to his teaching what we may call the Thaumaturgic Style. With a copy of Skeat's dictionary and an erudite expression of visage, this sage not only ranges himself, in the sight of his scholars, among the heroes of philology, but he actually inspires a suspicion that he must have been somehow concerned in the very making of the language, — so dazzling is the flash of the chalk, so overwhelming this rush of cognates and derivatives in all tongues of Europe. I once heard a brilliant young man lecture on certain ancient inscriptions; and so familiar was his dealing with the material, that certain of the audience got an impression that he not only had deciphered but had actually composed and carved the inscriptions themselves. Once in a recitation, perhaps, waning attention may be revived by one of these educational firecrackers (I recommend as appropriate to the habit, the word "vacillate," with humorous touches in the process of derivation); but more than this allowance must result in evil. In any case it is better to put a dictionary within reach of the class during its time of preparation, and to ask a few questions about etymology at a place where the progress of reading will be least interrupted. This is said of etymology, but not of historical and philological explanations necessary to explain the author's meaning. It is precisely here that a sound knowledge of English comes into play; and in reading Chaucer or Shakspere such knowledge is indispensable. It is always profitable. Where, however, a word has a plain meaning, with no important difference from present usage, — then no matter what mines of interest may underlie its derivation, let the treasure slumber unsunned. For example, we are reading *King Lear*. In the fourth scene of the first act, the Fool says:

This content downloaded from
203.99.157.59 on Mon, 25 Oct 2021 03:34:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

For you know, nuncle,
The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long
That it had it head bit off by it young.
So, out went the candle, and we were left darkling.

Here we must pay some attention to the words "it" (as possessive) and "darkling"; "nuncle," too, can bear a little comment. But in the seventh scene of the fourth act, that matchless scene where Cordelia bends over her awakening father, to stop for a word or phrase, except upon the direst grammatical compulsion, is suicidal. Everything should be subordinated to the necessity of bringing home to each scholar, in greater or less degree, the Artist and the Art, the supreme achievement. To teach appreciation — of the bad, moreover, as well as of the good — is a prime object of this course. In so far as a boy or girl is taught to appreciate the good, there must arise a corresponding distaste for the bad, the cheap, the tawdry. Hence the necessity of reading only the best. Happily our noble literature has ample store of material that will bear this stamp.

Comprehension is attained by direct study of a given piece of literature, and appreciation is sure to come in the train of comprehension. But both may be helped by historical and comparative studies. The historical method gives us the helps of nearness, — local coloring, precision, detail; the comparative method gives us contrast, relation, perspective, — the advantages of distance. Suppose we read with our class Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, — an excellent selection for teaching the technical side of poetry. We take, of course, Thackeray's *Four Georges* and *English Humorists*, and perhaps a chapter or two from *Henry Esmond*, coming close to the generation for which and out of which Pope made his verse. We read a paper here and there from the *Spectator;* in short, we take the evident path. All this has helped comprehension, in the first instance, and has done something for appreciation. But the latter object is best served when we try the virtues of comparison. This keynote of modern scientific investigation has done wonders for literature; it was the favorite method of our great critic, Matthew Arnold. Let us see what it will do

This content downloaded from
203.99.157.59 on Mon, 25 Oct 2021 03:34:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

for Pope, — of course, on the small scale alone possible in a classroom. Pope has some verses *To the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*, where the conventional character of his work is very evident as well as his great talent. There is plenty of chance for criticism. Take the couplet :

> Is there no bright reversion in the sky
> For those who greatly think, or bravely die?

Is this true ring or false ? There is no doubt about the conventional (but as Dr. Johnson would say "elegant,") character of the following :

> What though no weeping loves thy ashes grace,
> *Nor polished marble emulate thy face ?*
> What though no sacred earth allow thee room,
> Nor hallowed dirge be mutter'd o'er thy tomb ?
> *Yet shall thy grave with rising flowers be dress'd*
> And the green turf lie lightly on thy breast;
> There shall the morn her earliest tears bestow,
> There the first roses of the year shall blow. . . .[1]

Here are the virtue and the vice of Pope's verse; and the teacher will do well to insist on the former. Dr. Johnson, Byron, and Thackeray are a pretty strong jury, and we know what they had to say of Pope. But suppose we try comparison. Some bright scholar will be pretty sure to recall Byron's lines, "Oh, Snatched away in Beauty's Bloom," where certain verses are a close echo of Pope, although with a difference. But a far better comparison is to take the man who stands world-removed in every way from Pope, — Robert Burns. We will choose three of his lyrics in the same mood as that of the poems just mentioned. First we read *To Mary in Heaven*. This, we find, has no Scotch dialect; and while its pathos is intense, we note a certain conventional character not unlike the phrases of Pope. Next comes *Highland Mary*, — the same theme, but partly in Scottish dialect, warmer, richer, deeper. The conventional touch, however, is not quite gone. Lastly, we turn to the gem of all, the *Farewell to Nancy*, and there

[1] This, with the three lyrics of Burns mentioned below, are in Ward's English Poets, vol. iii.

This content downloaded from
203.99.157.59 on Mon, 25 Oct 2021 03:34:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

we meet a half-dozen lines, so direct, so sincere, so final, that Sir Walter Scott called them the essence of a thousand love-songs, and Matthew Arnold praised them with absolute praise. We might add the "Lucy" poems of Wordsworth. From this vantage-ground, we look back to Pope; and with what excellent results! On the other hand, to appreciate Pope at his best, let us read some of Wordsworth's more rambling and pompous work, and then turn back sharply to one of Pope's crisp epistles or a bit of the *Essay on Man*. This matter of making one poem criticise another is of unending profit. When we read a spirited modern ballad, let us read next a ballad of the old time, —*Johnie Armstrong*, that favorite of Goldsmith, or Coleridge's choice, *Sir Patrick Spens*.

I have no space to speak of prose literature in this paper; but much the same principles apply there as in poetry. It is, I hope, unnecessary to protest against the vanishing habit of treating poetry on the same lines with prose. Metre plays a leading part in poetry: why is any given poem in its particular kind of verse? Let the doubter compose an *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality* in the metre of the *Charge of the Light Brigade*. All children have a good ear for metre, but it is a hard fight to save this precious knowledge from the ravages inflicted by instruction in "elocution."

Much of what I have said is trite, and may well sound *ex cathedra*, or even oracular, in its presentation. But the *ex cathedra* tone, if not too insufferable, has the value of giving direct conclusions from experience. Thought is free. The halting, balancing method hardly suits this sort of work; for here, if anywhere, John Stuart Mill's saying holds good, that one man with a belief is worth ninety-nine men with an opinion.

FRANCIS B. GUMMERE.

HAVERFORD COLLEGE, PA.

This content downloaded from 203.99.157.59 on Mon, 25 Oct 2021 03:34:38 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms