

# THE VIRGINIA TEACHER

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## OBSERVATIONS ON THE TEACHING OF LITER- ATURE HERE AND ABROAD

A CONSIDERATION of the required reading lists in English, Scottish, and American schools shows what a general agreement there is in all three countries as to the literary works with which students should become familiar in the secondary phase of education. Obviously, Shakespeare is the most universally read of all the classics. No student seems to be able to pass through the schools in any country without reading at least two or three of Shakespeare's plays, and in many schools one or two plays are read in each year of the course. After Shakespeare there is general agreement on the novels of Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, and Eliot; the essays of Macaulay and Lamb; Milton's Minor Poems; Addison's de Coverley Papers; and selected poems from the greatest English poets, especially Tennyson, Browning, Shelley, Byron, Keats, and Wordsworth. As might be expected, certain American classics which are very widely read, do not appear on any of the English or Scotch lists: such are Parkman's Oregon Trail, Franklin's Autobiography, Hawthorne's House of the Seven Gables, etc. Hawthorne's Tanglewood Tales, Irving's Sketch Book, and selections from Longfellow's poems are quite widely used in England and Scotland, however. In fact, it may be that Longfellow is more used there than here. All the students in England seem to be familiar with Evangeline, King Robert of Sicily, etc. Certain books, as is to be expected, are quite commonly used there,

which are rarely found in this country: such are the works of Borrow, the third chapter of Macaulay's history, and Ruskin's essays. But the similarity of the content of the literary courses is much more noticeable than is the variation.

There is little more variation in the amount of time given to the study of literary history as distinct from the study of classics; and there is probably more variation between schools in the same country than between the different countries. The study of literary history is, on the whole, perhaps less in favor in the United States than in either England or Scotland, because of the absence of "Advanced Courses." None is prescribed by the College Entrance Board, nor by any of the universities, although a knowledge of the lives of the authors whose books are studied, and some information about the social and literary background out of which the work grew, is usually expected. The place of literary history in the high school is an often discussed subject at conferences of English teachers in the United States. Those who oppose its inclusion in the high school course point out the danger of its becoming a discussion of books about books, a show of information based on second-hand material, and this is certainly an obvious danger. If literary history is to be merely the reading of a textbook, it is certainly less valuable than many other things. Nevertheless, when it is an attempt to make the student acquainted with those men and women whose thoughts have been important in the history of the development of the race, it seems a very much worth while project. Such is the opinion of Carpenter, Baker, and Scott, whose book, *The Teaching of English*, although now



twenty years old, is still more up-to-date in most ways than many more recent books!<sup>1</sup>

"But in its general outlines, its larger movements, it (literary history) presents a development of thought and feeling more or less evidently connected with the history of the people, and constituting an interesting and valuable chapter in the history of human thought. Such an outline should be more than a mere skeleton. It should be based on a well-written textbook, and should be accompanied with enough incursions into the principal authors to get some sense of what they are like. If such a course succeeds in making the pupil feel a little more at home in the great body of our literature, and leaves in him the feeling that there are good things to be read at his later leisure all along the line between Chaucer and Tennyson, it will have more than justified itself."

This statement would be subscribed to by those many teachers who do teach literary history, and who believe that it is a profitable and interesting subject for the secondary school; although it is, perhaps, unfortunate that Tennyson should be put at the end of the line of good things to be read, for certainly one of the finest movements in the American high school is the inclusion of much modern and current literature. One of the greatest dangers of the old style literary course was that the student got the idea that literature was something produced in the past, a sort of a mystical process that was lost to his contemporaries. But when literary history is made to include the process that is still going on, when it includes and is based on a generous collection of the works of the authors studied, when it means a questioning and not a blind acceptance of critical opinion, it is certainly a valuable contribution to education. Perhaps we have gone too far in belittling it so much in American education in recent years. But at any rate, it has no currency as a college entrance subject in this country.

In England and Scotland, literary history is found mainly in "Advanced Courses,"

which are offered during the last year or two in the secondary school, after the general school examinations have been passed. Up to that time, literary history is usually only incidental, as in the American school. After that, if the student is to take English in his Higher School Examination, which he takes at the age of 18 or 19, he usually studies a special period. In each period several books will be set for detailed study, and, according to the Oxford and Cambridge Board,

"Each candidate will be expected to have such knowledge of the general history of the period selected, as is required for the appreciation of its Literature."

The periods for study are similar to those prescribed by the University of London. But in spite of these advanced courses, literary history is taught, in most classes, only incidentally, so that the attitude towards this subject is almost identical in all three countries.

The body of material to be taught, which is called literature, is, then, similar in the three school systems, and a consideration of the methods by which this body of material is taught will show that the methods, too, agree in the main. The justification of the teaching of English, and the teacher of English, is thus expressed by a great teacher:<sup>2</sup>

"Most people, I imagine, can point to a definite day when the glory of literature was first revealed to them, and often the magician has been a teacher. One day a man read something to you. He didn't tell you anything, or teach you anything; he just read something, and you suddenly found that straight in front of you was a door that led to paradise, and the odd thing was that you had not noticed that door until he showed it to you. That is a fanciful way of putting what generally happens. A few, by natural instinct or happy chance, have found their way alone; but most people, I imagine, have owed their induction to literature directly to some person. The book is before you: but till some mysterious voice cries "Tolle, lege!" you do not read, and the con-

<sup>1</sup>Carpenter, Baker, & Scott, *The Teaching of English*, New York, 1903, (revised ed. 1914)

<sup>2</sup>Sampson, Geo.—*English for the English*; Cambridge, 1922, p. 93.



version does not happen. Without the teacher most children would never so much as begin the approach to literature."

If this is the ideal, if the true teaching of literature is the process of leading the child up to the happy door, how seldom is success attained in any country. In too many cases, alas, in a secondary school the visitor sees a process more like this—

There are fifty lively boys, averaging about twelve years of age. They are reading "Guinevere" from Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*.

.... But when Sir Launcelot told  
This matter to the Queen, at first she laughed  
Lightly, to think of Modred's dusty fall,  
Then shudder'd, as the village wife who cries,  
"I shudder, someone steps across my grave;"  
Then laugh'd again, but faintlier, for indeed  
She half foresaw that he, the subtle beast,  
Would track her guilt until he found, and hers  
Would be for evermore a name of scorn.  
Henceforward rarely could she front in hall,  
Or elsewhere, Modred's narrow foxy face,  
Heart-hiding smile, and gray persistent eye.

The teacher reads the first few lines in a dry uninterested voice. They are then dissected. The most important fact brought out is that "dusty fall" is an inverted epithet. The boys are very restless. The class is then called upon to read. Each boy reads three or four lines—very poorly, but better than the teacher. They learn what sort of a figure of speech "subtle beast" is, and that "found" is used intransitively. Then follows ten minutes of guessing—enforced guessing—as to the meaning of "persistent eye." At this point, to the mutual relief of the teacher and students the bell rings, and the period is over. And that is the end of the literature lesson for two weeks, when twenty more lines may be taken up in this same way. A child has to have a great love of poetry to survive much of this sort of "teaching," and this lesson differs from any others only in degree, and not in kind. It happens to have been observed in London, but it may be seen any day in the United States or in Scotland.

Sometimes it is Chaucer. Here is the picture. A few pages of the *Prologue* have been assigned and prepared by the students. In class, each student reads a few lines, and then paraphrases or translates them. The teacher is a student of the classics, and this is the typical, old-fashioned classical method at its worst. There is some attempt made to understand and appreciate what it is all about, but the method is so piecemeal that the whole is blurred. These boys of sixteen and seventeen are just at the age when they should delight in Chaucer's music and humor and joy of living. But the teacher stands in the way, and insists on unnecessary detail and exaggerated scholarship.

Or again, and this time in Scotland, *Christabel* is the subject. Ten lines are read very intelligently by a boy of thirteen. Every student seems interested in the poem, and seems to understand it; but the conscientious teacher takes ten minutes to explain the ten lines, making clear what all feel and understand before she begins as well as they ever will.

Even Scott may be abused, and in Scotland! Some Scotch girls about twelve or thirteen years of age are reading *Ivanhoe*. They read one chapter carefully, talk it over with the teacher, and then write an extended summary in their best copybook penmanship. It is December, and starting when school opened in the autumn, they have now reached the nineteenth chapter. The terrible thing is that it never seems to occur to teacher or pupils that *Ivanhoe* is anything more than material for retelling. They show no interest in the story. They never read in advance. They never skip. They read one or two chapters a week and rewrite them. If the school year is long enough the book will be finished, but nobody seems to care. In another year they will leave the elementary school, and all schools, for ever, and this is their introduction to literature.

Fortunately, many times one finds real teachers of literature, who seem to be really



leading their pupils up to the magic door. Their methods are more like this:

A class of boys and girls, about thirteen years of age, are discussing with their teacher *The Merchant of Venice*. They have just finished acting out the play in class with some old cloaks and hats, some scout staffs, etc., as properties. This discussion is their first taste of careful criticism. They attempt to decide who is the hero, and Antonio, Bassanio, Shylock, and Portia are suggested. This leads to the question of what is a hero? The character of Bassanio is then considered, and the students argue lustily, finding in their books actual lines from the play to support their opinions. The teacher keeps the students at work, but he does not intrude his own beliefs, even though he is sometimes appealed to. He assigns, as the next lesson, the making of a list of all the characters in the play, classified as:

1. very important;
2. less important, but necessary;
3. slightly important;
4. not important.

A boy volunteers to name a character or two of no importance. Some of the other students object to his ideas, and the teacher says that for years he has been trying to find somebody who would point out in *The Merchant of Venice* some characters of no importance. The period ends with the students eager to begin on their lists, and looking forward to another intelligent and enthusiastic discussion in their next "literature lesson."

Again, here is a class of a dozen boys about seventeen or eighteen, in a well known English "Public School." These boys have all passed their school examinations, and they are in the Military Side, which means that they will have no more external examinations in English. They have a lesson in literature once a week. The teacher reads them the Nun's Priest's Tale, and he reads it well and with evident enjoyment. When it is finished there are a few brief questions on difficult words or

obscure passages, some of which are raised by the teacher and some by the boys. Everybody seems to understand and enjoy the narrative. Then the boys open their collections of poems at *Oenone*. Each boy reads several stanzas without pause or comment, and except in one or two cases the reading is extremely good, with understanding and appreciation. When the poem is finished, the lesson is over. There is no discussion, and none is needed. The poem has been vocalized and allowed to speak for itself. Most of the boys understand it completely and enjoy it, and no amount of dissecting will make those who do not like it come to do so—but it might make those who do enjoy it come to dislike it.

*Christabel* may be taught by a very different method from the one described above. A class of twelve year old girls in a famous school in Birmingham has just finished a rehearsal of a dramatization of Dicken's *Christmas Carol*, which they are going to present to the rest of the school. Afterwards they turn to *Christabel*. None of them have ever read it before. The teacher begins, and reads a generous amount very well indeed. Then she asks a very few questions on what she has read to be certain that the meaning of the poem is clear, and to overcome any possible difficulties. Then the reading is continued. The period ends at a very crucial place, with everybody wondering what is coming next. The girls all promise reluctantly not to read ahead, but to leave the poem to be continued at the next meeting of the class.

In an Intermediate School in Edinburgh, a class of boys about fifteen years of age are reading *Evangeline*. The boys read sections, and then the master questions them, and explains difficult points. The emphasis is on the story, and the master tries to make the boys feel the story and see its beauty—and perhaps he tries a little too hard, a little too conscientiously—but he keeps the interest of the boys; he is pointing out to them the magic door.



In the same school a class of boys and girls about twelve are reading *Marmion*. The teacher reads, stopping only when she feels a need of some explanation. A good feature of the work is that the story is put into its setting. Scott always makes his stories fit into some real locality, and the teacher takes advantage of this. A map is used, the towns mentioned are located, the distances are worked out, and the historical facts are explained. A boy who knows one of the towns tells the others what it is like. The story of *Marmion* is made to live again in the minds of these Scotch children almost as vividly as it lived in the mind of Scott.

If Shakespeare is being read, the students are usually reading in parts, and treating the text as a *play*, which is highly to be desired. Sometimes they sit in their seats and read in a stiff and uninteresting manner. Sometimes the teacher stops them too often and talks too much himself. Sometimes the discussion clogs the story. Much less often is there so little questioning and explanation that the play is left hazy in the students' minds.

The same is true of the story or the poem that is being studied. Usually, in these days, it is vocalized by either the teacher or the student. Sometimes it is read with gusto and enthusiasm; occasionally it is read in a deadly manner. Very rarely is there too little discussion.

What can be concluded from these observations? Only that the teaching of literature, more than any other subject in the school curriculum, is a matter of the personality of the teacher. Two teachers may pursue almost identical methods, and one will succeed and one will fail. The good teacher need not be a specialist, in any narrow way. He may be all the better for not being so. In the case of the first good lesson described above, the teacher is a well-known specialist in geography. But he knew English, he liked to teach it, and he had the unexplainable knack of creating

enthusiasm in the children he taught. He had the mysterious voice that cries, "Tolle, lege."

The teaching of literature will be good in the schools in the proportion that these qualified teachers exist. They do exist, and in considerable numbers, in England, Scotland, and the United States. At least half of the teaching observed is distinctly good, even where in many cases it is not incapable of great improvement. No rules and no method will make the rest of the so-called literature teachers successful. They do not have the enthusiasm that is necessary for the successful teacher of literature. They can never point out the magic door to anybody, for they do not know where or how to find it for themselves. They are the blind leading the blind. They are tone-deaf teachers of music, or color-blind teachers of painting. They must be weeded out of the schools. When we have universally teachers as good as the best that now exist, the teaching of literature will become a very potent force in education.

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### EDUCATIONAL LINGO

PROBABLY every profession, especially in its formative period, develops a jargon, half technical, half stereotyped, before a standard terminology becomes accepted. Because departments and colleges of education were established more slowly than the training schools of the other professions, a recognized vocabulary has not as yet been developed by educators. There is little more than a jargon. To be sure, some of these technical terms seem to convey so accurately the ideas which they represent that they have gained currency even among the laity. An example of such a term is "I. Q." ("intelligence quotient").

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