MACAULAY'S ESSAY ON MILTON

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ESSAY ON MILTON

EDITED

WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY

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PREFATORY NOTE.

To Professors Albert S. Cook, of Yale University, and George Lyman Kittredge, of Harvard, the thanks of the editor are due for their kindness in reading the notes to this little text-book while in proof, and for the aid of some timely suggestions and corrections.

But it is easy to say that boys are to be taught to write good English; to teach them that desirable art is a very different matter. For there is no better single test of the intellectual development and capacity of boy or man than his ability to write. If he writes well it is because he thinks well; he can no more write better than he thinks than water can rise above its source. He may, it is true, for a time write worse than he thinks; that is the loss by friction. But let him once conquer the difficulty of an unfamiliar avenue of expression and his writing measures him. If his thought is clear and vigorous, his vocabulary — indication of the range of his intellectual field — varied and under his control, his mind orderly and capable of grasping complex relations, then his style will be good; if, in addition, his imagination is quick and his feeling fine, he will add a higher quality of expression; while if his observation is imperfect, his memory weak, his ideas hazy, his mental processes slow and uncertain, and his grasp feeble, — so long as he is that kind of boy or man, no power on earth, or above it, can teach him to write.

If it is true that good writing means good thinking, if command and power of expression are simply the manifestation of command and power of thought, then the ability to write is the result of all education rather than something to be taught by itself. The justification of the introduction of English into the preparatory school is not at all that by its study boys may learn to write; nor is it a sufficient criticism of the old order of things to say that some college men are illiterate because they were not made to study English at school and pass an examination in English before entering college. If they write badly it is because their whole education was bad, and as a result their present mental development is inferior. If, notwithstanding that fact, they got into college and stay there, the explanation is that

notwithstanding their inferiority they are on the whole above the level at which their institution of learning will send them away. First divisions as a rule write well, no matter what they studied; it is the illiterate, reinforced by the lazy and the bad, who hang on the ragged edge. English — English worthy of the name — is to be taught, if it is to be taught at all, not because it teaches expression, but because it aids development; because the boy who devotes part of his time to the study of English classics is better educated, more mature or well rounded, than the boy who has given all his time to the study of Latin and Greek classics and mathematics.

A separate entrance requirement in English as a test of the candidate's ability to write may, by diverting our attention from the real issue, work positive harm. As a partial recognition of the importance of the ability it is a step in the right direction; but in so far as it implies that this ability is to be tested only by a single examination and developed by a particular line of study, it is altogether misleading. Inability to write is an impeachment of a school, not necessarily of a single master. It is inconceivable that a boy should be able to handle an involved periodic sentence on his Cæsar paper, if he be required, that is, genuinely to translate it, and not merely to give an inaccurate paraphrase, misnamed "free" translation, in which the display of a more or less loose knowledge of the vocabulary enables him to disguise his inability to comprehend the thought and construction — and then go to pieces when put to a fair test — when asked to write about a subject he understands — on his English paper. The pupil who learns to arrange his algebraic solution so that the eye may take in at a glance his process and results, whose demonstrations in geometry train him to be methodical, logical, and exact, is preparing for his English examination while he is master-

ing his mathematics. The truth is — as has already in effect been said — that the demand for better training in writing English in the preparatory schools is simply a demand for better preparation, for minds better disciplined and more fully developed. The logical conclusion is that the test of this must be applied, not in one subject, but in all. If the English test requires a maturity a year beyond that required in other subjects the candidate will not be kept out another year; he will get in — over the ruins of the barrier that the defeated English examiner attempted to defend.

Preparatory school English is in danger of seeking unassisted to accomplish too much. Its scope is so broad, the instruments which it puts into the hands of the skillful teacher are so various, that it may be made the means of disciplining almost any faculty of the mind. Through the opportunities which it affords for linguistic, rhetorical, and literary training, its study might almost answer for a universal education. But that it must not attempt. It must limit its field; it must seek out as its peculiar province that part of education which is comparatively neglected by the older studies, and which it is peculiarly qualified to accomplish.

It is to be hoped that it will not long continue to be held in popular opinion responsible for all the shortcomings of schoolboys and college students in the matter of written expression. Every preparatory school teacher must teach that — is teaching it all the time, whether efficiently or otherwise. Every written examination is an exercise in it; every translation influences it. Even the conventions and proprieties of written expression the violation of which constitutes illiteracy must be enforced in all departments if much is to be accomplished. A boy must not be permitted to misspell and ignore punctuation and use bad grammar with one instructor any more than with another.

The object of English as a preparatory study, then, is not to teach unaided and as its peculiar field the ability to write good English, though it has been said that the acquisition of this ability is one of the objects of the examination in English as a college entrance requirement. The other object aimed at by that requirement is that the pupil shall learn to like good books. And here we find the true and proper field of English teaching. Greek and Latin, formerly accepted without question as the peculiar instruments for the acquisition of liberal culture — the studies once called the humanities, have now partly been swamped by the growing importance of modern literature and history, and partly transformed by the influence of German scholarship and the scientific spirit, until they have become mainly the means of mental discipline and grammatical and linguistic drill. Parnassus is now climbed for the resulting benefit to muscles and sinews and lungs, and the ancient Pegasus labors among the dray-horses. It is the mantle fallen from the classics which English is now privileged to take up. To awaken and train a taste for good literature, to develop the æsthetic side of the youth, to sow the seeds of what may ripen into refinement and elegance and culture — here is the opportunity for English, and herein its high claim to a place in the established curriculum. Whether or no it can do this work better than the classics, were they taught by men of elegant scholarship and culture with this end in view, it is unnecessary to inquire. They are not ordinarily so taught; they do not attempt the work; and it is well to try English in their place.

How shall we teach boys to like good books? How educate and refine their taste? How teach culture? Knowledge can be taught; but culture? Appreciation, say some of our critics, is inborn; denied to some; in others a germ late fertilized, giving no sign of life until school days

are long past. Is not sensibility to beauty like sensibility to color, a matter of natural endowment?

It must be admitted that in the average schoolboy the æsthetic side of his nature is not highly developed. An English classic was defined at a recent meeting of teachers in New England as a work which the ordinary schoolboy will read with pleasure, and never forget. If by this is meant that he will attain to this laudable result unaided, either the commonly accepted list of English classics must suffer some wonderful expurgations or the ordinary schoolboy does not get to college. The writer does not recognize the type. He will frankly admit his inability in the case of a considerable part of a college Sophomore class to make them carry away anything more than an intellectual comprehension of *L'Allegro*—and even that impression so little permanent as to invest with substantial terrors for some of them the prospect of an examination six months away. It is not very difficult to interest college underclassmen in the *Faerie Queene;* but it is ordinarily for the story or the allegory rather than the Spenserian beauty of the language or the melody of the verse. Perhaps most of the boys who read the *Ancient Mariner* for the entrance examination were moved with a genuine appreciation of its poetry; but their papers would enrich a jest-book. It is idle to shut our eyes to the fact that intellectual curiosity and moral enthusiasm usually precede in the process of development the faculty of æsthetic appreciation.

The first and greatest obstacle in the way of the schoolboy's appreciation of literary style is the failure to comprehend the thought in all its fullness and suggestiveness. A happy epithet or poetic phrase must be caught by the eye and flashed through the mind before it can kindle the imagination. Rapid and superficial reading, mainly of fiction, and the diffuse abundance of the newspaper columns