

**TALKS ON
TEACHING
LITERATURE**

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Talks on teaching literature by Arlo Bates

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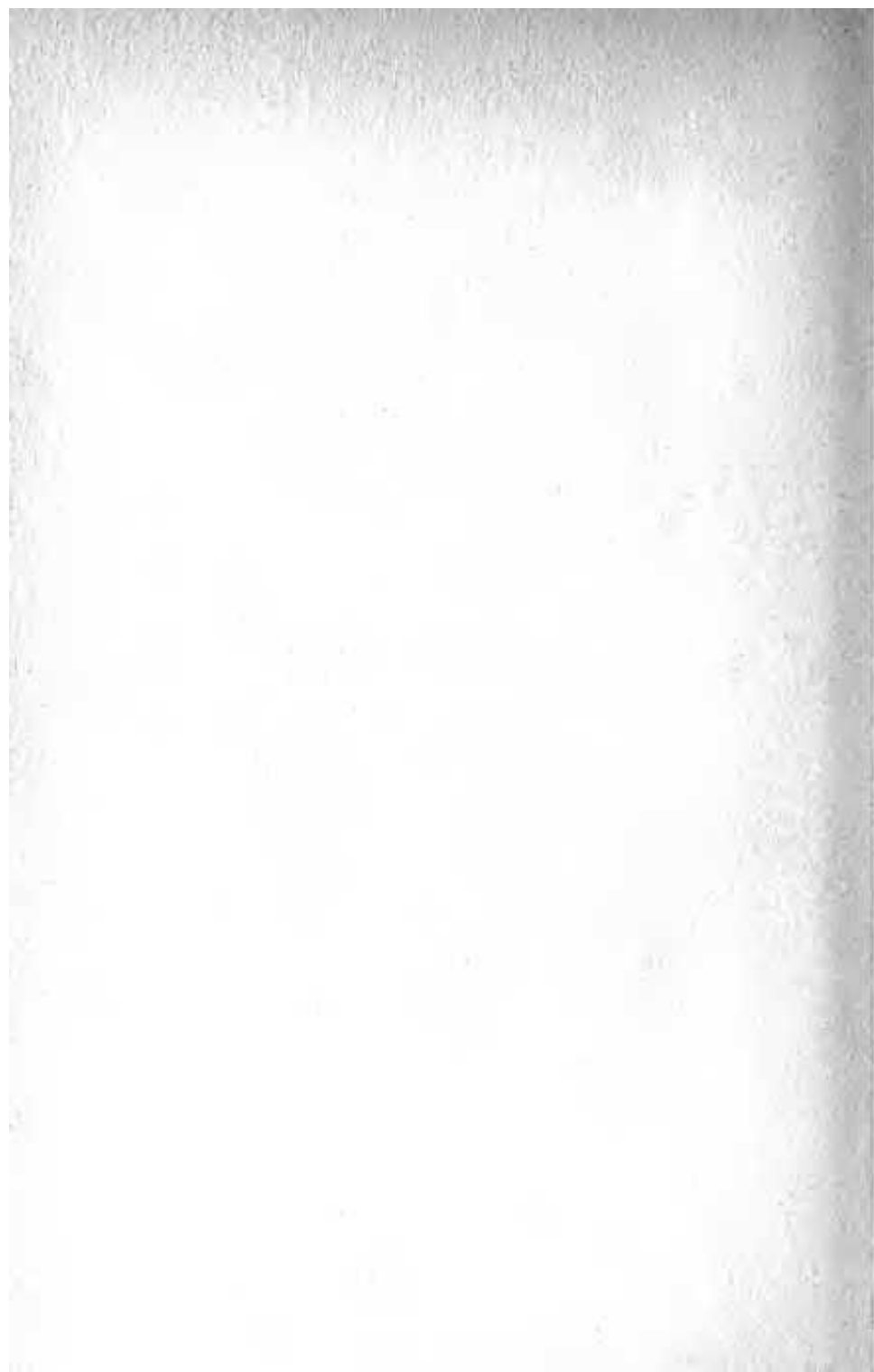
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THESE Talks are founded upon lectures delivered before the Summer School of the University of Illinois in June, 1905. The interest which was shown in the subject and in the views expressed encouraged me to state rather more elaborately and in book 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.



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-