

ON THE TEACHING OF POETRY TO CHILDREN.¹

BY M. H. SIMPSON.

IN speaking on such a subject as this to members of the P.N.E.U., the lecturer has the advantage of starting on the same basis as her audience. The question "What is the use of poetry?" means the same to you and to me. We do not mean "How will poetry help my son to make his living, or how will it help my daughter to make a good match—how will it make my children social successes?" but we mean, "How will it make them good and useful and earnest citizens?" [sic] Will it fill their minds with folly and vanity, or will it strengthen and adorn them? Will it make them dreamy, self-centred, artificial, unbalanced; or will it make life more real to them, self less important, the things of the spirit more vivid than the things of the flesh?" Many excellent people who have the welfare of their children deeply at heart, have a great dread of poetry. This is perhaps less so now than it used to be, but it is still common enough; the average British parent has still a feeling that poetry is high-flown nonsense, and that if a man has anything to say, he can say it in good honest prose; and there are still, I fear, many mothers, who would spend every evening in reading novels, who would be shocked if they saw their daughters buried in a volume of Shelley or Keats. And yet these same parents encourage their children to draw and paint and study music; why is the sister art, to my mind the first of all the arts, so neglected?

My experience is that very few English men and still fewer English women know anything about our poetic literature at all. Most of us "did" some Shakespeare at school, and if we are going to see a play acted we often read it over first; but how many people sit down over the fire of an evening with their Shakespeare in their hand and read and re-read him? There has been for some time back a certain fashion for Browning, and most educated people have read some of his poems and study him a little, and would recognise a quotation from "Abt Vogler," or "Rabbi Ben Ezra." People usually know their Tennyson pretty well, and we have all read a little of Mr. Stephen Phillips. Must we reluctantly admit that there we pause? We are a nation with the most extensive and varied poetic literature in the world; can it be said that we know more than three or four of our own poets really well? If we are not a poetic people how is it that we have produced such an enormous number of poets? If we are not a poetic people, was that "wise man" of old, justified in his cry, "Let *me* make the nation's ballads, and I care not who makes its laws?"

It cannot be but that there is in us a natural love of poetry and romance, however much our national training, our absorption in the present, our realisation only of the facts of life, have smothered and deadened it. Poetry is the expression of our spiritual instincts which our present materialism will not let us hear. I know no satisfactory definition of it. Perhaps the truest in meaning, though the coldest and most uninviting in sound is M. Arnold's, "Poetry is the criticism of Life." The poet takes his stand outside life, looks upon it as a whole, places it in the light of the ideal, recognises its limitations, understands its true aim. He throws upon it—
"The light that never was on sea or land,
The consecration and the poet's dream."

And why? For what end? To teach us something? Yes, but not chiefly, for didactic poetry has seldom reached the high-water mark. To inspire us with a sense of something beyond our transitory aims and cares, to give us a glimpse of what is real and lasting, to hold up before us that mirror in which the true and the false assume their right shapes, and nature, art, life, are

seen as God made them, and not as we have disfigured them—these are its true functions. I believe most sincerely that the poets do this for us and that by our ignorance of what they have written we are depriving ourselves of a glorious heritage. It is a matter of which it is difficult to convince others, the fact being that it is only by the constant study of poetry that we come to a realisation of all it can do for us. Like all the arts it must be practised if it is to have any meaning for us. You do not expect to have a perfect appreciation of Beethoven without training. The child and the working girl like a gay tune. Take an uneducated person to a picture gallery; he may like the Friths or the Peter Grahams, or the Landseers, according to his type of mind, but it is very unlikely that he will be attracted by Botticelli or Turner or Rembrandt. You want some one to point out the beauties in the first place, then you study them, get to know them well by reproductions, *believe* that they are fine and do your utmost to get to think so. Do people treat poetry like this? Our friend who has exquisite reproductions of Raphael and Watts and Millet on her walls, who goes to all the classical concerts and loves Schumann and Grieg—ask her if she knows Lycidas—“Oh, I have read it of course, but I don’t remember what it’s about.” Does she read Shakespeare? “Well, I went to see that play the other day, what’s it called? All’s Well that Ends Well, where Malvolio comes in!” Shelley? “No, I can’t say I ever read any Shelley.” Swinburne? “No; he’s an atheist isn’t he? The fact is, I haven’t *time* for poetry.” I beg you to believe that we are quite as much wanting in culture if we don’t know Lycidas, as if we don’t know Watts’ “Hope,” and that we ought as readily to say of any poem we come across, “That must be Pope or Keats or Byron,” as to say of a picture, “that is surely a Leighton or a Corot or a Burne-Jones.” People nearly always seem to think that if the love of poetry does not come to them ready made it is a waste of time to try and acquire it; and yet you may be stranded without a piano, you may be in lodgings whose walls are hung with oleographs or cheap engravings representing neighbouring magnates, you can never be sure of commanding either music or painting, but learn a few good poems, and you have an undying possession, an unfading joy.

I said that poetry presented nature, art and life to us in their true light, and I should like to touch briefly on this, before I go on to speak of what is more directly the subject of my paper. The part which poetry plays in making Nature more real to us is one of its most exquisite functions. Browning says very truly—

“We’re made so, that we love

First when we see them painted, things we have passed

Perhaps a hundred times, nor cared to see.”

True of painting, true also of poetry. The words in which the poets describe the common objects of our daily life, fill us with a sensation of pleasure which we can never lose. Think of Tennyson’s Pleiades—

“Fireflies tangled in a silver braid.”

Or

“Autumn laying here and there

A fiery finger on the leaves.”

Or Shakespeare’s daffodils

“That come before the swallow dares, and take

The winds of March with beauty.”

Or Coleridge’s

“Hidden brook
In the leafy month of June,
That to the sleeping woods all night
Singeth a quiet tune.”

Or Shelley’s
“Even the busy woodpecker
Made stiller by her sound
The inviolable quietness.”

Or Cowper’s
“The red-breast warbles still, but is content
With slender notes, and more than half suppressed,
Pleased with his solitude and flitting light
From spray to spray, where’er he rests he shakes
From many a twig the pendent drops of ice
That tinkle in the withered leaves below.”

Such quotations are merely to give an idea of what I mean—that the sounds and sights of the country have an added charm for us when they are expressed in language which it is impossible to forget. You will remember the delightful criticism of Tennyson’s poems, in Cranford, the old country gentleman, saying out loud in a grand sonorous voice—

“The cedar spreads his dark-green layers of shade.”

“Capital term ‘layers’—Wonderful man!” I did not know whether he was speaking to me or not, but I put in an assenting “wonderful.” He turned sharp round, “Ay, you may say wonderful. When I saw the review of his poems in *Blackwood*, I set off within the hour and walked seven miles to Misselton and ordered them. Now what colour are ash-buds in March?” Is the man going mad? thought I.

“What colour are they, I say?” he repeated vehemently.

“I am sure I don’t know, sir,” said I.

“I knew you didn’t. No more did I, an old fool that I am! till this young man comes and tells me. *Black* as ash buds in March. And I’ve lived all my life in the country; more shame for me not to know—*Black*—they are jet-black, madam!”

When we speak of poetry as revealing art to us, our thoughts naturally turn to Browning, though he does not actually write of art itself, so much as of the relation of art to life. Abt Vogler gives us thoughts of the inner meaning of music, it does not actually give us an impression of music. But you cannot read Milton’s “Ode on a Solemn Music,” without feeling a new revelation of what the actual sound of music may mean. The heaven which we are accustomed to look upon as metaphorical, a place where we shall be always singing hymns and harping upon harps of gold, seems to become an exquisite and most desirable possibility when described in Milton’s glorious and stately verse.

As with music, so with the other arts. The poets touch them and we become aware of a meaning unperceived before. I must point again to Browning as the exponent of the relation between painting and life; but it is not so much in his poems which deal most avowedly with the objects of art as in such exquisite little poems as “Eurydice to Orpheus,” or “A Face,” that we feel what a picture really can be. Rossetti’s sonnets on pictures are among the most beautiful and vivid poems of this kind—particularly I should like to call to your notice the

sonnet on Michael Angelo's Holy Family, beginning

"Turn not the Prophet's page, O Son."

and the sonnet on Botticelli's "Spring."

What poetry is to us as a revelation of life, I think we shall never adequately understand. It is almost impossible to realise how much our current speech, our thoughts, our way of looking at things has been moulded and affected by the language of the poets. Our thoughts turn at once to Shakespeare; if he had been the only poet who ever lived the amount we owe to him alone would be quite incalculable. Take any play and glance through it. One is amazed at the wisdom, breadth, foresight, judgment, nobility of aim, which breathes from every page. I take up, for instance, "Measure for Measure," and turning over a few pages I find such sentences as these—

"Our doubts are traitors

And make us lose the good we oft might win

By fearing to attempt."

"'Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus,

Another thing to fall."

"No ceremony that to great ones 'longs,

Not the king's crown, nor the deputed sword,

The marshall's truncheon, nor the judge's robe,

Become them with one half as good a grace

As mercy does."

"Why, all the souls that were, were forfeit once,

And He that might the vantage best have took

Found out the remedy. How would you be,

If He which is the top of judgment should

But judge you as you are?"

"O, it is excellent

To have a giant's strength, but tyrannous

To use it like a giant."

"Man, proud man,

Drest in a little brief authority,

Most ignorant of what he's most assured

His glassy essence, like an angry ape,

Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven

As make the angels weep."

"That in the captain's but a choleric word

Which in the soldier is flat blasphemy."

"The miserable have no other medicine

But only hope."

"Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,

Not light them for themselves."

"Spirits are not finely touched

But to fine issues."

Of course it will readily be admitted that Shakespeare is exceptional—but he is not alone. Go to any of our poets, turn over a few pages and you will be unfortunate if you do not find the

problems of life, its beauty, its sadness, its mystery, its joy and its pain more real and more vivid in the light thrown on them by this wonderful power. Instances will rise in your minds as I speak—such as Wordsworth’s “still sad music of humanity,” or those fine lines in which he speaks of one who—

“Doomed to go in company with pain
And fear and bloodshed, miserable train,
Turns his necessity to glorious gain.”

Or you will remember Tennyson’s—
“All experience is an arch where thro’
Gleams that untravelled world.”

And his—

“Well roars the storm to those that hear
A deeper voice across the storm.”

Or Shelley’s—

“Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught,

Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought. [sic]

Or M. Arnold’s—

“Each day brings its petty dust,” etc.

I hope you will not think that I have wandered very far from the subject of my paper, and that you will understand that I thought it necessary to emphasise my view of the importance of poetry before I could speak to you of teaching it. If you agree with what I have said, you will feel with me that we must train our children to love this great inheritance, and I think you will also feel that we cannot begin too young.

There was an interesting and valuable paper in the *Parents’ Review* some time ago, on “What is Poetry?” In that paper there was one sentence with which I could not quite agree, the statement that children have little natural feeling for poetry. I do not think this is so—I believe that in most children the feeling is there, but it is seldom drawn out and encouraged. We assume that they have none, and so we tell them stories in verse, but do not give them little descriptive bits of poetry or call their attention to pretty ideas and epithets. I am quite sure that if you have a love of poetry yourself you can bring it out in your children, and it is a well-known fact that what they learn when quite young impresses itself with marvellous distinctness on the brain. You must begin as soon as they can speak. Their brains are always working, they are always learning something, why should they not learn what is really good? Now, we do not set ourselves deliberately to teach our children anything by heart at that very early age, but we repeat little verses and rhymes to them and we find that there is a great unconscious delight in rhyme and metre. The child picks up the verses we repeat to him, without the slightest trouble. The memory at that age is extremely good and we may as well make use of it, but above all things we must beware of forcing or distracting it. We notice that the child loves to have the same thing repeated over and over again. This is by all means to be encouraged. Monotony, which we are inclined to dread and avoid, is life to the child’s brain. The multiplicity of toys, of games, of books is thoroughly bad for him. Begin with nursery rhymes and if you repeat Jack and Jill a hundred times, you must begin with fresh ardour on the 101st if the little voice says “again.” If he wants anything fresh, he will tell you so. Probably, by the time you have repeated

it six or seven times he will know it as well as you do, but he likes to hear it all the same.

There are certain things which we feel our education would be incomplete without, and to that class the old-fashioned nursery rhymes belong; but we should not encourage too much of the school of poetry of which Stevenson's "Child's Garden of Verse" (charming as his verses are) is a popular example. People say they are the very thing for children, "just what a child would say." Exactly; but you don't make pictures for children, "just what a child would draw," or tunes, "just what a child would compose." You want to make poems, pictures, tunes, just what a child would *like*, but my own belief is that he instinctively likes something whose full beauty he cannot quite understand. We should try, I think, to get hold of all the really pretty little poems suitable for children, chiefly those descriptive of animals, or of something like the moon, or the stars or anything the child can see. A poem like Mary Howitt's "Little Woodmouse," is always liked by tiny children. Repeat it with little simple comments of your own. The child will soon know it and you will hear him repeating it to his toys. If you are fortunate enough to live in the country and can go for a walk in a wood, you must quote the poem, "I wonder if we shall see a wood-mouse here. Perhaps he is eating his dinner of chestnuts ripe and red," and so on. It is good to get hold of poems about the sea, quoting bits of "The White Sea-gull, the bold Sea-gull," or of Matthew Arnold's "Forsaken Merman" ("the wild white horses foam and fret"). There are many poems, too long and intricate for little people, out of which you can quote bits that will delight them; and it will add a great joy to their reading in later years when they come across the lines they used to be able to repeat. I believe I owe much of my love of poetry to a dear old Scottish nurse, a country woman born and bred, to whom the sights and sounds of nature were an intense delight and who had a knack of picking up fragments of verses which she used to recite to us in a delightful sing-song, whenever we were in the country. I shall never forget

"How sweetly bloomed the gay green birk," etc.

Or

"Oh, the broom, the bonny broom."

Or

"Bird of the wilderness."

Now if you know a good deal of poetry yourself you will be able to make everything your children see beautiful to them. Every child who looks out of a window at night likes to repeat "Twinkle, twinkle, little Star." He would soon grow to like Shelley's lovely description of the moon in his "Cloud." "That orb'd maiden, with white fire laden," etc.

But the principal thing to be remembered is this: the child's memory is his strong point at this age, before he begins to read much. What he learns now he does not forget and he can take in an enormous supply, so long as it is a matter of pure memory. I know some people think we should not teach a child what he cannot understand. Personally, I feel most strongly the opposite. Store the memory, but leave the intelligence to work as slowly as it will. You are much more likely to overtax a child's brain by explaining things to him than by letting him learn what he enjoys at first, only for the sake of the sound and swing. By this I mean that I would teach him poems of which he understands the subject and the general idea, but would take no steps towards teaching him the meaning of words or phrases. You can soon go on from the little poems, to Horatius and Ivry and the Lake Regillus and bits of Marmion and the Lady of the Lake. Teach them in the same way, by reading or repeating them over and over again and showing

illustrations if you have them. He will delight in the swing of the verses and the rapid action—Macaulay, Scott and Aytoun are particularly good for this and also for another feature which the child likes, the bringing in of fine-sounding proper names in a dramatic way. Many of the old ballads are very suitable, and good modern ones such as Young Lochinvar, Rosabelle, and Lady Clare. The great advantage for children of learning poems in this way, by hearing a lover of poetry read or repeat them, is that the fine points are brought out in a natural way. The child follows the cadence of the voice, he hears the pathos, or the fire, or the anger, and he appreciates them. You do not *say* “That is a fine line,” but you feel it and your voice shows you feel it, when for instance you repeat the account of the dark grey charger’s flight home, in Regillus, and how at his appearance
“Old men girt on their old swords.”

If you wait till your child goes to school, you send him unarmed. The extracts of poetry in his reading book are to him merely one lesson like another. He reads them, and with a good teacher he may get to know and love them, but it does not come in a spontaneous way, and he is not as a rule prepared to enjoy them. As he gets a little older you will give him the Idylls of the King and the Ancient Mariner and Rosetti’s White Ship; and by this time you need not fear but that his taste is forming in the right direction. He will not care for twaddle and will begin almost unconsciously to choose out the finest and most poetic passages in what he reads. Then we are brought face to face with a difficulty. Are we to let the boy or girl browse freely in the realms of poetry, is it safe, is it wise to let the young fancy pick up what it pleases? Having implanted the love of poetry, how much supervision are we to exercise over the way in which that love is directed? Here, as in all questions about the training of young minds, hard and fast rules are an impossibility. So much depends on the character and temperament of the child, that what is wise for one is dangerous for another. Broadly speaking, I should say that you might throw your shelves open to most children and that what they read and choose does them no harm. Nevertheless, there are dangers which we must be on the alert to guard against. I should be very chary of saying to boys and girls of fifteen or sixteen, “don’t read this or that.” It only excites curiosity and may tempt to secrecy and disobedience. In the case of novels I should say, don’t have any lying about which you don’t want your girls to read. In the case of poetry it is more difficult. Much as I admire the lyric genius of Burns, I should be very sorry to see his poems in the hands of a boy of fourteen or fifteen. One cannot imagine anything more demoralising than the effect of much of the flippant treatment of sin which is characteristic of a great deal of Burns’s poetry, on a youthful and unbalanced mind. The difficulty of the language is fortunately a hindrance to most young readers, and if we turn to Burns in later life, when our minds are more balanced and our curiosity less vivid, we shall find a wealth of beauty surpassed by no poet. But if you do find your boy deep in Burns, what are you to do? or if you find him luxuriating in the most anti-Christian of Swinburne’s poems, what are you to do? It will happen very seldom, no doubt, but it does happen occasionally. First of all I should say do not exclaim in horror and tell your child to shut that book and never open it again. By all means avoid letting him think that there are interesting things which he is not allowed to know about. I think, myself, that the line to take is to begin at once to talk to him about the poems, ask which he is reading, whether he likes it, discuss it or say quite openly that you don’t think it a nice poem—then tell him something of the life of Burns, his temptations, his love of pleasure, his genius, which you illustrate by turning to the best proofs of it, emphasising the sadness of the

wasted life and of the genius prostituted to ignoble uses—the ugliness and coarseness of the themes—your own wish that your boy should not read or care about such things; and then leave the subject and do not refer to it again. And with Swinburne, there is so much that is so magnificently beautiful, so much that is exquisitely simple, as in the Jacobite Ballads and all the Baby Songs—and yet there is certainly a danger to one type of mind in the fiercely unbelieving tone of many of the poems. Had we not better treat this in the same way, laying stress on the beauty of style, letting the child see that we admire it as much as he does, and then perhaps reading a poem like the Armada through to him, explaining as we go. And let us above all things point out to him, that the God whom Swinburne decries is not the loving and merciful Father whom we know, but a figure of Swinburne’s own creation, whom he *imagines* to be the God whom Christians worship. It is a false god, the god of hatred and revenge, whom Swinburne loathes. I think this might be made clear to any young person who had fallen in love with the “Poems and Ballads,” and probably only good and not evil would arise from it.

A subject like this is never ending, and I must apologise for the length of this paper and ask for your forbearance on the ground that this training and wakening of the poetic imagination is the best earthly treasure that we can give our children, and that therefore no time spent in thinking about it can be wasted.

¹ A paper read before the Leeds branch of the P.N.E.U.