

THE APPROACH TO POETRY.¹

By MONK GIBBON.

Forty years ago my father preached a sermon in Dublin. I was not there to hear him, but the other day I met someone, a chance member of his congregation, a theosophist, and not, I imagine, a regular churchgoer, who had been there on that occasion, and who remembered him all these years because of a single phrase in his sermon. 'Poetry is not something to be criticised. It is something to be enjoyed.' When he repeated this to me, I said, 'Yes, I am sure my father said that.' I remembered what a lover of poetry he had been all his life, and how after his death I had found one of his interleaved Bibles devoted not to sermons at all, but to quotations from the poets which illustrated, or seemed appropriate to, particular passages in the Old and New Testament.

Now if it is permissible to offer anything so dogmatic as a text to such an august and highly critical body of people as the members of an educational conference, my text to-day would be an emendation of that phrase of my father's. It would be this. 'Poetry is not something to be studied, it is something to be enjoyed.' I am down to speak to you on the 'P.N.E.U.'s approach to the study of poetry,' a rather formidable subject, and at the very outset I would say that the study of poetry is only

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important as a means of its enjoyment, and that where children are concerned the first step is to see that they enjoy, after which they will probably take the second step for themselves, namely, the trouble to study those poets whose work needs some preliminary elucidation if it is to be appreciated.

For children still do appreciate poetry, even to-day. We live in an age of incredible vulgarity. When I see Royal Academicians and people of title lending their photographs to propogate the virtues of a particular brand of gin, I feel that our values have got a little mixed and that there is a danger of a generation growing up for whom that terrible effervescence of empty-hearted hospitality—the cocktail party—may be the only entertainment life has left. Where will poetry be then?

I notice that in his latest book Livingstone stresses the difference between the freedom and unpretentious style of Athenian life at its best, its peace and learned leisure and the restless, artificial, luxurious existence of Rome which—to use the very words Lucian puts into the mouth of one of his characters—'like a torrent sweeps away modesty, virtue and uprightness, and in their place grows the tree of perpetual thirst, whose flowers are many strange desires.' Take care that at this very moment when we are organising bigger and better roads—with fewer trees along them—bigger and better hotels, so that wherever we go we will find ourselves in the same place, bigger and better newspapers, so that whatever is hideous in life may reach our ears within a few hours of its happening—poetry, which is one of the things that can't be made bigger and better, but must just remain quietly and unobtrusively and for ever itself, doesn't drop unnoticed out of the running, leaving us to our steel-girdered world of material things in which to find such pleasure as we still can.

I do not think that this will happen. As I have said, I believe that those who are growing up now, still need poetry, and still like it. I had a rather touching illustration of this the other

day, something too personal to relate here except that the protagonist is quite unaware that I am in the secret. A mother showed me the gift her daughter had made her last Christmas. Accompanying it was a card which said, 'Just a few golden

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memories of happy times reading.' The gift itself was a tiny box, a little longer, about the same width, but shallower than a match box. On the cover had been pasted a painted slip with the words, 'I have owed to them in hours of weariness sensations sweet,' and when one lifted the lid inside were between twenty and thirty tiny coils of paper, neatly rolled up, one beside the other, so that they look rather like the cells in a honeycomb. On each scroll was inscribed in minute writing a quotation from Wordsworth. I took one out, unrolled it, and read:

'Not for this
Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur; other gifts
Have followed; for such loss I would believe
Abundant recompense.'

Another:

'Have not we too? Yes, we have
Answers and we know not whence;
Echoes from beyond the grave
Recognised intelligence.'

A third:

'She gave me eyes, she gave me ears,
And tender hopes and delicate fears,
A heart the fountain of sweet fears
And love and thought and joy.'

What amused me, I must tell you, was that the mapping pen had signed *each* quotation with a microscopic W.W., so that no other poet except the sublime William should get the credit for it.

That to me is real appreciation of poetry and real appreciation of poetry's intention for us. 'I have owed to them in hours of weariness sensations sweet.' If Wordsworth is still susceptible to earthly fame he must be flattered to think that after a hundred years a schoolgirl is still drawing solace like this from his words and sharing it with someone she loves.

There is a rather curious footnote to this story. When later I met this same scribe, unaware of course that I was in the secret, she had just the abrupt, jaunty, defensive armour behind which youth shelters itself to-day as though we had taught it that the possession of a heart was something to be ashamed of. There is something wrong with an age that dreads seriousness so much that even youth has to force a greater exuberance than it naturally feels. Personally I think that our intellectuals who

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are so contemptuous of, and, at the same time, fascinated by the old-fashioned standards that they spend their lives writing books against them, have led us for the moment into the wilderness. For they have broken the continuity of thought. They seem to imagine that petrol, which revolutionised men's lives, must have revolutionised their minds and their morals also, and that we must start completely fresh, evolving out of our twentieth century consciousness all that is necessary for our twentieth century salvation. I believe in progress, I see tremendous advances in psychology, in educational theory, in humanistic idealism, but I see in no country except Switzerland any stability of tradition in which the people as a whole, including the intellectual leaders, are holding to what is best in the past as well as going forward to what is best in the future.

It is a mistake to despise anything that is not new. This Christmas my son, aged five, was overwhelmed with that spate of mechanical novelties with which we make our children happy at this season. But on Boxing Day I found him playing with a screw-topped bottle of water which his nurse had filled for him and which contained one small submerged crumb as a fish, to be shaken vigorously to and fro. I regard that incident as a parable. The delight in simple things is one of the fundamental requisites of our lives.

And of these poetry is one. And it is not only this, but it is an element in that continuity of thought of which I spoke, one of which religion and philosophy are also a part. Poetry is one of the means by which we hand on the torch of the human spirit. It was Flecker who said, 'It is not the business of the poet to save souls, but to make souls worth saving.' You can't organise poetry, you can't feed it to the child in the curriculum by carefully measured spoonfuls, you can't hold conferences to decide when and where and how exactly it will be administered, but it is none the less important for all that. Poetry is not a school subject. Nor is it a joke, a sort of cheap joke at the expense of young people in love, who are deliriously happy, or young people out of love, who are moody and self-analytic. The joke is threadbare, and it was never one in which a people like the Greeks, who saw in poetry as it were the sustenance of the soul, could

[p 312] have indulged or which the finer type of mind in this country approved. Poetry is not a jest, it is part of life, it is the deepest expression of thought and feeling of which certain exceptional minds have been capable, and when we read it is as though we ourselves shared in those thoughts and those emotions. When I see a child, boy or girl, full of all that health, energy and intelligence which augurs well for the future of certain children and which is a sort of promise written in their faces, I have always a dual ambition for them; that they should grow up to be good athletes and they should be lovers of poetry. Neither ambition is enough in itself: the athlete with a stunted, limited mind, unable to adventure outside a certain range, his very achievement limited to the time that youth and health last, is, despite all our admiration for his prowess, only half a man.

Granted then the importance of poetry, how are we going to introduce it to the child? You will never *make* a girl or boy like a poem against their will. You will never bully them into it, or argue them into it. You may convert them by indirect means, by infecting them by your own zest—take care that such zest is genuine, children are never converted by shams—but you can't beat poetry into them, and you will be disappointed if you try. In fact it is a very immoral proceeding indeed if you do try, nearly as immoral as trying to bludgeon someone into accepting your religious convictions under pretence of saving their soul. Poetry and religion are

the two things to which sham appreciation or sham loyalty are forbidden. They touch the soul so intimately that anything that is forced or insincere in our attitude towards them destroys their usefulness for us. It is my settled conviction that the only enthusiasms we can convey are the vital enthusiasms which we ourselves have felt. If you do not like poetry there is an obvious remedy: introduce the child and the poem and leave them to make friends for themselves. They may, or they may not, but you can never make things better by your interference. And in introducing people it is generally a mistake to praise too much beforehand. You may only establish a distaste. In the same way it is a mistake, even when you like it, to praise a poem too eloquently. After all the child is entitled to form its own opinion. We don't all like the

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same hats, the same clothes, the same puddings, why should we like the same poems? The better I like a poem the less inclined I feel to speak about it. It is one of these significant experiences in life about which one wants to remain silent. To drag it into the glare of publicity is to lose some of those very qualities which made it precious. If then I share it with someone else the most I feel inclined to say—imitating for once the taciturn English—is, 'I like this, do you?' or 'This is rather fine,' or 'I remember how much this moved me when I first read it.' And when the poem is read I have no inclination to spoil it by my adulation. I never like those people who gush after a concert. Silence is the best praise of all. And how wise children are in this respect! They will say more in a word or in a speechless pause than we can ever express by our chattering.

I do not want you to misunderstand me. I think that we do influence children by our enthusiasms, that we can infect them with a liking for something which we already like ourselves. My admiration for Ruskin is my father's admiration, my interest in certain periods of history is that of a certain master at my public school. But I think—and more than ever where poetry is concerned—I think all such enthusiasm has to be conveyed deviously, almost indirectly more than directly, or at any rate in terms of such studied moderation that there is no danger of your prejudicing the listener by over-praise. In the case of younger children I think one should try and create a mood of enjoyment, firstly by choosing the sort of poem they are likely to appreciate and then by throwing oneself into it, or better still allowing them to throw themselves into it with zest.

I am an amateur schoolmaster. One of my more penetrating pupils said to me once, 'You don't teach us, but we learn from you.' I recognised the truth in what they said. It was at once a reproach and a compliment. But how awful if I did teach them, and by teaching them gave them a distaste that might last them all their life.

You will say, I am not being practical enough. Is it possible to inculcate a love of poetry in a large class of thirty, and how? I have never been confronted with the problem myself, and I hope I never will. But I still believe it would be possible. First

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by convincing them that poetry is neither a jest nor a hideous task, then by persuading them to remain quiet enough to enjoy it, and finally by doing what Miss Mason always advocated, introducing them to *good* poetry of a sort suitable to their age and leaving it to do the rest. I don't say mass methods of introduction are the best. I would like presently to see the same children enjoying other poems in a more solitary, slightly less Fascist manner. And, by the way, never *declaim* a poem to a class. It generally makes the poem, and it very often makes you look

slightly absurd. Read it aloud if you like, or get one of the class who reads well to do so. If you get the whole class in turn to read a verse, the poem may suffer excruciating tortures in the process and be spoilt. But what I have found effective with younger children, especially where ballad poetry is concerned, is to let the alternative verses be read in unison, chanted so to speak by the whole class, and if you lead this Greek chorus yourself you will find that the metre does not get too mangled and that everyone is given an opportunity of enjoying the rhythm of the poem and giving expression to it themselves.

And here I must touch on two further issues of a practical nature. Should children learn long passages of poetry by heart, and should poetry be made part of examinations? Should they learn it by heart? Some months ago I was present at a verse-speaking audition. Twenty or more children piously declaimed, one after the other, a rather slight little lyric about a drop of water, pretty enough in itself, perhaps, but wholly unsuitable for mass declamation. It began:

Over the stone fell a drip
A shimmering, shining slip
Of Water—drip, drop, drip!
Drop!
Drip!
Never
Stop!
Drip!
Drop!
Yesterday
From far away
A Will o' the Wisp
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Came this way,
Laid her lip
To mine to sip,
Drop!
Drip! ...

And it ended, after a little more about the fairy:

I was a drip,
A drop before
She kissed my brow
With her lip, her lip,
And now—
I am a tear.
Drop!
Drip!

I can tell you that long before the twentieth child had finished I felt like putting up my

umbrella and going home to recover, with quinine and sal volatile, from the effects of this devastating thunderstorm. That is the sort of poem I think children should *not* learn by heart, or at any rate recite collectively. It does not give poetry a fair chance. But that does not mean that I do not believe in learning by heart, or that I do not envy a generation who found time, like an uncle of mine, to carry almost a complete library in their head and to chant you, on demand, anything from Catullus down to Swinburne. That uncle must know thousands of lines by heart and I am sure that his personality is the richer for it, apart from the fact that it is a delight to listen to him. In the same way I am sure minds can be enriched to-day by the learning of poetry, provided the poetry is good enough. Of course, capacity varies enormously. Some children find it easy, others find it desperately hard. I think one must just temper the wind to the shorn lamb, encouraging those with good memories to store them well and not spoiling poetry for others by driving them too hard. I was once guileless enough to suggest to a class that they should choose for themselves the poems they would learn by heart. But I found that their taste invariably gravitated towards the short poem:

‘My little Ben, since thou art young
And hast not yet the use of tongue,
Make it thy slave while thou art free—
Prison it, lest it prison thee.’

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That, written by John Hoskins to his child Benjamin from the Tower, was their idea of a really good poem!

I myself, where Shakespeare is concerned, believe in picking out short pithy passages, accidentally as it were, and suggesting to the children that they should memorise them.

‘Cowards die many times before their death,
The valiant never taste of death but once.
Of all the wonders that I yet have heard
It seems to me most strange that men should fear
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come.’

No schoolboy was ever the worse for having got these lines by heart.

Shakespeare brings me that most thorny of questions—examinations. There is a good deal of cant talked nowadays. I have just been reading the letters of Cezanne and Zola, some of them written when they were still schoolboys. The ardours of a French lycée education certainly do not seem to have destroyed *their* love of literature. My view of the situation is this: when there is a predilection already, no schooling will spoil it, and one may be all the better for the discipline of real study. When there is no predilection, cramming will defeat its own end and probably result in a life-long distaste. What are you to do? you will say. If you leave poetry out of the curriculum the child may ignore it altogether; if you introduce it, it will be hated? Miss Mason did not think so. She headed her educational manifesto with that magnificent phrase of Whichcote’s: ‘No sooner does the truth ... come into the soul’s sight, but the soul

knows her to be her first and old acquaintance'; and she herself wrote: 'The work of education is greatly simplified when we realise that children—apparently all children—want to know all human knowledge; they have an appetite for what is put before them, and, knowing this, our teaching becomes buoyant with the courage of our convictions. We must put into their hands the sources we must use for ourselves, *the best books of the best writers.*' I am not one of those who believe that any particular educational body possesses a sacred writ which covers all eventualities and meets all occasions, but I will say now that to me the P.N.E.U. attitude to literature as it concerns the

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child has always seemed the right one, if not the only one. 'Great things are done when men and mountains meet, these are not done by jostling in the street'; this was another of Charlotte Mason's favourite quotations, the mountain in this case being the book of real literary quality, and the man—the child. I have seen her faith justified in a wonderful way in some primary schools I have visited in Gloucestershire, and though I believe she sometimes threw her net almost too wide and over-estimated the readability of part of Plutarch, I am certain that her faith that children assimilate from the best what they are ready for, in a way that they never assimilate from carefully re-hashed banalities, is a true faith and one that has been triumphantly vindicated again and again. You know, I know, we all know, the difference between a *real* book, when we are lucky enough to discover it, and the pseudo-books which only dissipate our mental energy and leave us pretty much where we were before. And if we know it, why should the child not know it too?

If we believe this, then by right presentation, or rather merely right introduction without any palaver at all, the number of children who dislike literature is considerably reduced, if not actually non-existent. I—or rather the authors I used—have managed to strike sparks out of the most apathetic when the right occasion presented itself. I regard it as a crime to devote more than a term and a half at most to the study of any play of Shakespeare for *any* examination. I regard it as folly to ask children to compare, to dissect and to analyse different poems, for to do this is either to make them liars or to make them more self-conscious towards literature than they should be at their age. And I regard it as a mistake, or at least very risky, to set modern poetry as examination matter, for youth is the age at which one should be discovering such things for oneself, and rejoicing over them in a more solitary fashion, not having them thrust at one in a school.

It might be better if poetry were omitted altogether from examinations, but if you do so you run the risk that the schools that exist for results may simply give literature the complete go-by and concentrate on the more profitable subjects. If you do examine on poetry, I am sure of one thing. The aim should be

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to get the child's interest and delight in the poem, not by asking him to discuss, to criticise or to compare, but simply, as Miss Mason advocated, to express his own interest and appreciation.

Actually at Oldfeld, the school—the community I prefer to call it, for our aim is to create something like the family on a much larger scale—where I am, poetry meets the child in a number of ways beside the class. It and music ought to be and are part of the accepted pleasures of life. Just as music is played to the children after lunch every day—and they can read or go to sleep as they choose, so long as they remain quiet—so on alternate Sunday

evenings poetry and prose are read aloud to them while they amuse themselves with their handicrafts, mounting stamps, painting or doing basket work. No one need listen, but listen they do. The result is that our boys go on to their public schools, quite as keen on games as any other boys, but accepting certain cultural interests as quite natural, interests which normally might not enter their lives until they were sixteen or seventeen, if at all.

Finally, one word about the poems children write themselves. When children write poetry I am not a great advocate of getting them to imitate the more rhetorical forms they may have read. This leads to insincerity or precosity or preciosity, and the results are not very valuable in themselves. Imitation of the ballad form is a little different, and may lead to good results, though here again there is a danger that the child may be content merely to copy something which he has heard. On the other hand, I am against giving them *carte blanche* to express themselves any way they like, in free verse, for instance, which the Americans and their imitators over here are rather fond of doing. I think this is only justifiable in the case of very young children. With older ones it makes poetry too easy a matter, conceals from them the discipline the poet imposes on himself, and is rather as though you started to take a ten-year-old child to hear Cortot and then applauded a completely untutored thumping on the piano when you came home. All arts present difficulty, and it is a mistake to pretend to the child that they do not. The poems that please me best when children write for me are those that express quite simply and directly, but in a

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disciplined form and without too many echoes from literary sources, the mind of the child himself. Take this very simple poem by a boy of twelve:

A BUTTERFLY'S DEATH.

This afternoon I went and caught
A pretty little butterfly;
I put him in the killing box
And left him there till he did die.
I wish I had not now, for he
Is sweeter far when he is free.

I took him out a day after
And stuck a shining pin through him;
I put him on the setting board
And took another shining pin.
I opened out a coloured wing
And fixed it down with that bright thing.

Or this, by a young woman of ten, who has added a footnote to the effect that her last line is a bad one, meaning that it is not strictly true:

'THE RICH LADY AND THE STREET-BOY.'

A street-boy walking in the street
Came upon a lady neat.
He looked at her with longing eye
And could not quite refrain a sigh.

She noticed his long shaggy hair
His bright brown eyes and skin so fair.
He noticed her fine fur-lined gloves,
The kind that every street-boy loves.

Or this extremely tragic poem entitled

THE DEATH OF BILL.

'Where are you going with all them sacks, eh Bill?'
'I'm goin' ter take them down to't mill in't cart.
I guess I won't get back before the storm;
There sure will be one—see the lightning dart.'

'You'd best be buckin' up, I guess. Good-day.'
'Good-day,' says Bill, and rumbles down the hill.
He leaves the sacks and turns his horse, when, crash!
The mill is struck; it falls and buries Bill.

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The stones have broken Blossom's shafts—she's free,
And rushes homeward, raising cries of fear;
Excited farmers follow and find Bill.
But they're too late—well may they weep a tear.

Or this reflective poem by a girl of fifteen, to which I have given the title

ALREADY I KNOW THIS.

As one bright star that seeming close
Mid its companions swims the skies,
Yet in a naked void alone
Is born and lives its life and dies.

So I amongst my friends, that dwell
But a mere hand's stretch from my heart,
Feel that I live and think my thoughts
A million million miles apart.

And as no signal yet can flash

And throw from star to star a sign,
So yet my deadened ears can hear
No message from their souls to mine.

All these poems are—to me—good child poems because they are genuine.

I come back to the point from which I started. In the long run we can only hand to our children what we possess ourselves. If we want them to be lovers of poetry, no cant or humbug or pious eyewash on our part will be of any avail if secretly we despise poetry ourselves. If we want them to be rational and sane and broad-minded, the chances are all against it if we are ourselves mines of prejudice or backwaters of timid conventionality. It is a truism to say they learn by what we are far more than by what we say. Physician heal thyself. Educator educate thyself.

Literature is the sum total of the courage and hope, the faith, delight and despair of the past, and if we deny youth this, and give them instead a little pale scepticism of our own, a conscientious distrust of the ideals which have sustained other generations and other ages, a belief that the world began yesterday and if we are not careful will end to-morrow, because our own idealism is unequal to the problems it has to face, then

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we do them a poor service. All our aspirations for the young are likely to be defeated unless we hand them on a certain moral stability, a belief in beauty, truth and goodness for their own sake; whereas if we give them these—and in giving them these poetry will surely be included—we have at least the assurance that we have done our best to equip them adequately for the certain difficulties of this uncertain world.

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