

CITIZENSHIP AND LITERATURE.

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“Democracy and Taste,” the general subject of this afternoon’s conference presents two obvious and comprehensive difficulties. For Taste has never yet been satisfactorily defined, while Democracy in this country is practically indefinable. I intend to set my own limits to Democracy as far as this paper is concerned by considering only that part of the people using the elementary schools, leaving out the rest of
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the populace, not because I believe their taste to be impeccable nor yet because I consider them past praying for, but because I work with elementary school children and know more about them. Taste I shall define as that spiritual activity within every human being which seeks perpetually for what is beautiful in life.

I think we have ample proof that Democracy is animated by this spiritual activity, among the children I know it to be a vital force. In Upper Tooting, where I worked for some years, it took the form of an indefinite longing for more satisfying things. With the elder girls it produced a pathetic disturbance of the general placidity of the neighbourhood, a restless desire to extend the bounds of unusually restricted lines. The result was a somewhat anæmic taste—a desire for daintiness at all costs—a ladylikeness of choice perfectly safe within the limits of convention, but entirely unreliable when confronted with anything unusual. Epstein’s “Rima” stands no chance with Upper Tooting. Life runs smoothly for most of the children. They are suitably housed, well fed and well clothed, they are seldom called upon to form definite judgments and their taste is exercised only in the trimmings of life.

In North Kensington where I now work, living is a more elementary affair. Life is a never ceasing struggle. The housing conditions are scandalous. The children are badly fed, badly clothed, the youngest are often called upon to make desperate decisions and their spiritual activities are exercised upon the very breath of life. But the particular spiritual activity which seeks beauty is no less inherent in them, and it expends itself on the necessities of living. Here are no vague anæmic longings. The very language they speak is rough effectiveness and when they try to rise to the height of a great occasion they do it with enviable gusto; like a father who wrote to me a while ago a note of thanks for something I had done for his daughter. “Dear Madam,” he started, and a line or so lower down he ended, “I am, dear Sir, your most obedient and humble servant.”

The grandiloquent terms in which mothers clothe the simplest requests and the big words the working man loves to use are commonplace evidence of this same seeking for better things. So greatly do the children desire better things that they effectively persuade themselves that they have them. I have known many a child, living with six or seven others in two
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miserable rooms, dispose of the family each in a large separate bed at night. I have heard many a hungry child who has had only the staple diet of the poor for dinner—tea and bread and perhaps tea and broken biscuits—protest that she has had meat and two vegetables. Nearly always the children have had a hot bath and a complete change of clothes the night before I complain of their great unwashedness. A tall, ill-fed, pale girl of thirteen recently assured me

that she had custards and jellies for her “afters” at dinner. And if there is any question of payment for spectacles or dental treatment a child never owns that her mother has no money, she merely says she has not any change. This is not lying, nor is it only the justifiable defence against somewhat impertinent, if well meant questions. Its foundation is undoubtedly so great a desire for what should be, that it refuses to acknowledge what is. The children sometimes reach an ideal quite beyond the rest of us. I recently looked reprovingly at a child’s dirty boots. She at once assured me that she cleaned them every night. I evidently looked unconvinced for she added, “and every morning too.” “But surely,” I began, “if you’ve done them over night. ...” “But they get dusty again by the morning.”

It is interesting to note that Democracy at its most comfortable and Democracy at its most wretched are alike in this. When utility guides their taste the result is nearly always quite satisfactory. And so we find that while children on week-days are usually suitably and tastefully dressed, Sundays both in suburbia and in the slums, become an orgy of ugliness.

Granting that the æsthetic sense is innate in the people, the question arises as to what we are doing to train it. And I think it must be owned that as teachers we have not realised the place the æsthetic sense holds among the other spiritual activities of mankind. So busy are we cultivating the intellectual sense and the moral sense that we forget that the æsthetic sense is of at least equal importance with the other two and that, without beauty, intellect and morality are as nought. Keats was undoubtedly right, in a very practical way, when he said:—

“Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

Many children show quite a keen sense of beauty—unconsciously—even the poorest, dirtiest and most wretched of them. I have known some coming from deplorable

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homes display an appreciation of design, a sense of colour and an absorbing enjoyment of good literature. It is rather a wonderful sight to watch a crowd of these young children listening intently to Beethoven’s Egmont Overture or Mendelssohn’s Fingal’s Cave or other classical music, judiciously administered. With all this native taste to work upon it seems the greater pity not to establish and develop it before the ugliness of life in towns or the emptiness of life in the country closes in upon the child. For undoubtedly ugliness is more potent than beauty. The wretched advertisement boards along the railway line blur our recollection of a lovely country. The ugly posters unhappily produce the largest sales. It is the hideous dream that disturbs our sleep; we are seldom awakened by the exquisite beauty of a dream. This being so it becomes all the more urgent that a child should, from the earliest years, be trained to see beauty and to know it surely, before her sensitiveness has been dulled. We want to create a standard of beauty, to show the simplicity of beauty and the beauty of simplicity. We want to make the child realise that the “Penny plain” is so often much better than the “Twopence coloured.” We want her to be able to enjoy difficult as well as obvious beauty. We want her above all to be sincere in her taste, retaining at the same time humility in the presence of great work even if she fails to understand it. How well, unfortunately, we know the tendency of the day to boast an ignorance of Art. “I don’t know anything about music.” “I can’t see anything in Turner.” If only we can get the children to say with deep longing, “Give us eyes to see and ears to hear and

hearts to understand," we shall have done much to equip them for the difficult art of living. But to achieve this state of mind in children, it is essential that the general atmosphere of the school should be right, and that the one unifying aim in the variety of its enterprises should be this quest for beauty.

Let us not think that the art periods and the music lessons are the only occasions school offers for training of the beauty sense. Citizenship provides inexhaustible opportunities. The books set by the P.N.E.U. for the study of Citizenship are particularly valuable in this respect. *Ourselves*, Miss Mason's own contribution to the subject, *The State and Social Welfare*, by J. W. Peck, *The Complete Citizen*, by R. Wilson, and Arnold Forster's *Citizen Reader* provide together a comprehensive review of our privileges and responsibilities, our duties to our-

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ourselves and our duties to our neighbours and provoke a broad understanding of life and sympathy with the living. Thus in *Ourselves* the ugliness of insularity is contrasted with the beauty of nationality, and while the child is made to realise the happiness of being a "British" subject, she is at the same time reminded of the contributions of other nations to the world's beauty. And the whole is permeated by Miss Mason's belief (I am quoting from *Ourselves*), "We all need to have our eyes opened before we can take in the joy that is meant for us in this beautiful world."

Not only is the child herself discussed and her social relationships, but her home is brought under review. She is made to bring her judgment to bear upon the planning, decorating and furnishing of houses. Here is endless scope for training the æsthetic sense, and Upper Tooting, which in the present generation hopes for no other beauty than latticed roses on bedroom walls, roses to match in the bedroom linoleum and artificial roses on the drawn thread duchess sets of the dressing table, may in the future entertain other schemes of decoration. And North Kensington in its congested squalor, may in happier circumstances, find more appropriate art to display upon its walls than Leighton's "Wedded." In connection with this subject of house decoration and furnishing, I think it is so important that the housewifery centres where the elder girls practice housecraft should be models of good taste. One I visited a few weeks ago, would as a warning, be an excellent piece of work, but unhappily it was not exhibited as a warning. An ugly kitchen with every ancient inconvenience, a scullery not fit to clean boots in even, a sitting room used as a class-room with a wretched motto askew over a hideous mantelpiece, a bedroom furnished with wretchedly cheap white furniture, long lace curtains, badly dyed greenish-yellow covers to bed and dressing table and on the walls horribly conceived painted texts—anything less likely to inspire the beauty of holiness it would be impossible to find. Surely æsthetics could with profit become a compulsory subject for the Domestic Teacher's Diploma.

And as the Citizenship books make the children consider their homes critically, so in turn they direct their attention to education and the schools. And here again it is essential that her own school shall satisfy the child's awakened interest in her surroundings. The newer schools provided by the State are

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in many ways delightfully planned and suitably embellished and cannot but have influence on the improvement of public taste. But with the present threat of curtailment of expenditure on education with the ominous issue of Circular 1371, I should like to put in a plea for the

beautifying of the older schools. I know many of these old schools where the very atmosphere repels—where ugly buildings have ugly staircases leading to ugly classrooms. And the pictures on the walls of these rooms are often incredibly unsuitable. Imagine a child being condemned to sit five hours a day opposite an enormous photograph of a hippopotamus, a life-sized head of a bull or a terrifying study of a lion. Fancy little girls living continually with the “Death of Wolfe,” the “Death of Nelson,” or the more ghastly “Death of Jack Cornwall.” Think of being shut up daily with the “Retreat from Moscow,” the rabble after Waterloo, or huge red-headed Ancient Britons in the act of spearing their enemies. And these pictures are retained in the school for no other reason than that the frames are good and the glass not broken. Apart from the ugliness of the schools, they are often in positions so noisy that even the much condemned “Teacher’s Voice” is unable to penetrate the din; where trains scream by continually, where shunting operations go on all day and where ’buses stretch in never-ending line. And I know playgrounds so small for the crowds of children turned out to play in them that playtime is nothing but a riot of ugliness, and I know class rooms for little infants so badly placed and lighted that only a wintry gleam penetrates them even in midsummer.

Let us hope that the study of Citizenship will, in the course of time, make Democracy determined that schools like this will not be left standing. For I am convinced that we shall never make Democracy safe for the world till the people have been trained from childhood in beautiful surroundings to seek continually for what is beautiful. Then and only then will the day dawn when litter no longer defaces the town and countryside, and when ugly hoardings will not be tolerated, when sky signs are no more, when villages will no longer be spoilt by hideous gasometers and manufacturing towns by filthy smoke, when ruthless motorists will be unknown, when picture palaces will be beautiful places showing beautiful films, when theatres will make one glad and when a good concert will be considered better value for money than a betting slip.

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The appreciation of literature does not depend, fortunately, on material things, and taste in literature can be trained irrespective of the child’s surroundings. The rich man in his castle and the poor man at his gate are equal in this—they both speak the same tongue and the same realms of gold are free to both alike, provided they are given the key. And it is one of the joys of the P.N.E.U. that the key is entrusted to the child at a very early age. She is never turned adrift in other fields till she is considered mature enough for the fields of gold. She is not fed on books for infants, nor told tales in baby language. But before she can read, she is read to straight from the immortal texts. She gets the Bible stories as related in the Bible, she gets *Pilgrim’s Progress* as related by Bunyan, she gets Andersen’s Fairy Tales in a fair translation not as reconstructed in words of one syllable to accommodate her stage of reading, she gets Æsop’s Fables in adult form. And so she gets quite familiar with mature language before she is called upon to read it. This is an enormous advantage in schools, where the home vocabulary is very restricted, and makes it possible not only to attempt more literature, but to attempt more difficult literature, than could otherwise be done. At quite an early age P.N.E.U. children read and enjoy Shakespeare, by Form III. they can find pleasure in Milton’s *Comus*, *Samson Agonistes* and some of the early books of *Paradise Lost*. It has been a revelation to me to find how greatly children enjoy Plutarch’s Lives, and how effectively they narrate them, reproducing the vigour and power of North’s translation. By a judicious mixture of omissions, reading to them while

they follow from their own books and letting them read the more impelling passages, they get a good knowledge of Scott. They almost invariably like Stevenson. They get to know the Sagas of the North and the mythology of the South, and Bulfinch's *Age of Fable* is invaluable in rendering explanation of classical allusions unnecessary. They read poetry daily.

And what is the result of all this reading on the children's taste? When I was young and working on other methods, I used to get the girls to read what I considered they ought to know. The result was often discouraging. I remember a girl of fourteen who got through *The Vicar of Wakefield* telling me "It's what I call a dull book." Last term a class of younger children not only read it and told it back chapter after chapter with absolute understanding, but showed considerable appre-

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ciation of its rather delicate humour. The views of a girl who left school about a year ago interested me recently. She is now a messenger at a big London stores [sic]. She was commenting on the reading of her fellow-workers. "Don't think I am being superior," she told me, "I should really like to be able to read their stuff, but I simply can't." I often think too I might be accorded a worse epitaph than the verdict of an old pupil—now about eighteen years old and working in a blouse factory. She concluded an entirely frank discussion on my management of her at school with the remark, "Anyhow you made me love poetry." Not long ago I came across two old pupils sitting on Wimbledon Common reading Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to each other, and in school a few weeks ago a child was absolutely absorbed in Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle* and refused to be disturbed. In my early days this would not have been remarkable as books were few but good, but in these days of cheap production when the proportion of good books to bad is as the needle to the haystack, it is gratifying. Anyone not acquainted with good elementary schools would be astonished at the books the children borrow from the public libraries.

It is ignorance of modern developments to delegate Democracy to an inferior position in this matter of taste in Literature. Taste is largely a matter of training and given the chance Democracy stands on equal terms with the rest of the Community. I had an interesting proof of this a few years ago when I took twenty girls from my class on a school journey to Box Hill. The hostel where we stayed was also housing a party of Girl Guide officers in training. By a fortunate chance some of my party discovered that some of the Guide officers had been brought up in P.N.E.U. Schools. The Elementary School child and the High School party met on equal terms in the mutual discussion of books and music and pictures they had studied in their respective schools and the appreciation of the one was no less than that of the other.

Let us then offer Democracy the best in full measure, knowing that which ever way we define Democracy it comprises by far the greater part of the people and that this great part has inherent in it the spiritual activity which seeks for beauty; and remembering too that while modern changes bring disappointments in their train, a thing of beauty remains a joy for ever.