

# On the Teaching of Poetry

By Mary A. Woods, Headmistress of the Clifton High School

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Most people will agree with me that poetry ought to be taught. Doubtless there are still some who hold that it is a mere amusement, a trifle fit only for the nursery or the drawing room, and unworthy to encroach on the sacred hours devoted to science and mathematics and physical education. And others will tell me that it is too *good* for the schoolroom. Poetry, they say, the ripest fruit of the ripest thought of mankind, should not be squandered on minds too crude or too weak to receive it: the audience of the true poet, if fit, must always be "few". But these two classes are in a minority, and I do not propose to deal with them today. I must assume that poetry is good, and that, being good, it yet cannot be too good for our children. The points I wish to raise are the objects and the methods of teaching it.

Why do we teach poetry? Some will say, "Because of the moral lessons inculcated by means of it." Others, "Because it strengthens the memory, and-if only hard enough-the reasoning powers." Others, "Because it illustrates history, or grammar, or etymology," or "Because it affords useful practice in analysis or composition." Now, I want today to plead for the teaching of poetry *for its own sake*, as one of the fine arts, ranking with music and painting and the drama, and having similar aims and uses. We do not, if we are wise, demand a moral, in the ordinary sense of the word, in the pictures we show our children, and the music we play to them. We demand that the artist should be inspired, that he should be a true artist, touched with the fire of a genius, and then-let it be a comedy of Shakespeare's, or a landscape of Turner's, or even a dance tune of Chopin's-we use it fearlessly. "Better such things," we say, "than the sickly apologues, the so-called 'religious' prints, and the 'sacred' music, too often thought good enough for children." "And so," I would add, "better the nursery ballad, if only it has the right ring about it, than the doggerel hymn." This may seem a strange thing to say, but if we accept the doctrine for some of the arts, why not for all? Whatever the reason, poetry is certainly the art that has suffered most cruelly at our hands. You remember the story of the commentator who was greatly exercised as to how the Duke in "As You Like It" could find "books in the running brooks" and "sermons in the stones." It was a curious phenomenon, he thought, even in an

enchanted forest which produced lions and palms. Suddenly a light broke in upon him. Evidently the words had got transposed. What Shakespeare really wrote must have been-

*stones* in the running brooks,

sermons in *books*.

“See, my dear young friends”-we can fancy him saying-“how the Immortal Bard, with equal lucidity and truth, calls attention to a not unusual phenomenon. If we look into brooks we shall, in all possibility, find stones; if we look into books we shall, only too possibly, find sermons.” Well, we don’t treat our poetry exactly like this, but what we can do to spoil it we do. In this same play of “As You Like It,” Touchstone says to Audrey, “I would the gods had made thee poetical!” Ah! It is not “the gods,” it is not Nature, that has refused to make our children poetical. It is we who, with our petty maxims and theories, to say nothing of our prosaic lives and worldly ideals, have done what in us lies to destroy the poetry that was born with them. We give them any doggerel that will, as we think, convey a moral or otherwise useful lesson, we repress the instinct for time and for tune, for music and for color, for the “something not understood,” which are of the very essence of poetry, and by paraphrase and analysis and elaborate explanations reduce all to the dull level of prose. The temple stands before us, ethereal, beautiful, reared-like Milton’s-to music; and, instead of entering and worshipping, we break down its walls and calcine its stones, and submit them to chemical analysis, and imagine we have discovered its secret. Or, to change the metaphor, we are asked for the essence of the flower, and we pull it to pieces, and examine its petals and stamens, and pronounce triumphantly on its order and sub-order, its genus and its species; but the color and the perfume that made up its life, where are they? The flower-spirit had shrouded himself in these, and when they died he unfolded his wings and fled, and what remains is no flower at all, only lifeless dust.

How then *should* poetry be taught? In order to answer this question I must attempt a definition of poetry, not indeed adequate, but sufficiently so for our present purpose. It is one which covers, I think, the whole of lyrical poetry, and the more poetical passages of epic and dramatic poetry. I would define poetry, then, as the musical expression, by means of words, of thought charged with emotion. I use the word “musical” not of course in its technique sense, but as applied to rime and to rhythm, the sweet consonances and cadences of verse; and the word “emotion,” as applied to

all forms of human feeling, from the impulses of love or of sorrow to the subtleties of foreboding or regret. If we go further and analyze the genesis of poetry, we shall, I suppose, find that thought, when sufficiently charged with emotion, when heated-as I have heard it expressed-to the white heat of passion, instinctively seeks a rhythmical outlet. This is the case even with passionate prose; and what is rhythm in prose becomes meter in poetry. Thus the elements of poetry are thought, emotion, music; and I lay stress upon the music, because I believe it to be not only an element essential to poetry, but an element too apt to be overlooked. Poetry appeals primarily to the ear, and its sounds ought to satisfy the ear. This is true even of poetry as profound as Milton's, to whose blindness we are doubtless in part indebted for his majestic harmonies, and it is more obviously true of the ballads and other simple poetry more suited to children. And it is precisely this element of music which is the first to appeal to children. For the child the order I have given is reversed. It is not "thought, emotion, music," but "music, emotion, thought." A child will hear and enjoy the music of a poem before he can appreciate the emotion; he will appreciate the emotion before he can understand the thought. Now this order, which is the natural and therefore the healthy one, is obviously to be followed in all attempts to teach young children. I would say, then, if you ask me how to teach poetry-

1. Trust the child's instinct. Let him learn what satisfies his ear, and don't be troubled if his taste is at first rather crude, if he prefers a marked to a more subtle melody, and lays unnecessary stress upon rime or metrical accent. You may call this "sing-song," but it springs from the music in the child, and it is at any rate better than the common-sense intonation-the intonation as of a newspaper paragraph-which grown people will sometimes give to the most exquisite verse. It is often said, "Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves." I think there is even more truth in the paradox, "Take care of the sounds, and the sense will take care of itself."

2. Read to the child, as beautifully as you *can* read, the most melodious things you can find. Ask him whether the tones are those of sorrow or joy, anger or entreaty, desire or regret. Then turn to the words for an explanation of the emotion. Begin with a simple ballad, a lament or a war-song, and go on to one of the stirring descriptions in Scott, or a lyric of Shakespeare or Tennyson, and so on to the organ-music of Milton. Don't be discouraged if your pupil turns restive, and tells you he would rather hear "The King of the Crocodiles" or "The Walrus and the Carpenter." You have hurried him on a little too fast, that is all. You must wait. Above all, beware of making his

knowledge the measure of his progress. I have somewhere seen "Lycidas" recommended as a suitable poem for the children in junior forms. Poor children-and poor "Lycidas"-and poor teacher, who is preparing for himself so bitter a harvest of disappointment! No doubt something may be done at this stage. The child may be told who Panope and Hippotades were, and find the latitude and longitude of Namancos and the Hebrus, and learn the meaning of "Camus" and the "sanguine flower," or even of the "grim wolf" and the "two-handed engine." And no doubt his wits will have been sharpened and his memory strengthened in the process, and he will, perhaps, talk grandly about understanding Milton, and despise the babyish verse of Coleridge and Wordsworth. But it is more likely that he will rebel against poetry in general and Milton, in particular, as the dullest, deadliest draught ever compounded by a teacher. And meanwhile what he has been learning is not poetry at all, but mere subsidiary knowledge, which, if acquired in the right way, may be very useful to a student old enough to appreciate the subtle music and changing emotions of the poem, and anxious to understand it in detail. But such knowledge should be acquired, as far as possible, independently of the poem that demands it: the child's wits should be exercised on figurative bone and India rubber, and not on material so delicate and exquisite as poetry. The training necessary to understand "Lycidas" must not be obtained at the expense of "Lycidas."

3. If possible, let children recite together, keeping time and tune, and reproducing in concert the music of the original. I have heard this objected to as mechanical, but I think the objection arises from confusing the functions of author and interpreter. The interpreter-whether musician, actor, or reciter-is great in proportion as he gives you not himself but the author-in proportion to the purity with which he transmits the light of another's personality, undimmed and unbroken by his own. And if this is true of men and women, whose opinions and characters are already formed, it is still more true of children, whose mental growth depends so largely on the degree in which they can assimilate the thoughts of others, and are protected from vanity and self-consciousness. When we set our children to play the melodies of a great composer we do not ask for their own little *fortes* and *pianos*-their feeble attempts at a spurious "expression;" we bid them on all such points follow the direction of the composer, and so learn by degrees to feel, and if it may be to understand, the mind that has dictated them. And so, when I listen to "Horatius" or "The Forsaken Merman," I want to hear the clash of swords and the tramp of armed men, and the passion that moves them, or the anguish that mingles with the sobbing of the sea; I

do not in the least want to know what Tommy or Ethel think about them. In fact, for the moment I want to forget Tommy and Ethel altogether, as I hope they will forget themselves. No doubt, as they grow older, children will unconsciously give a somewhat different intonation to the things they love, as each leaf and each wave responds with a difference to the breeze that stirs it. But such difference, subordinated to a common impulse, produces not discord but harmony; and meanwhile I know of no better training, at once in a healthy self-forgetfulness and in the dramatic appreciation of a poem, than the common effort to reach the feeling that dominates it, and to reproduce its music.

4. As the child grows older, illustrate by paraphrase both the meaning of the poem in hand and the difference between poetry and prose. I have already alluded to paraphrase-irreverently: but the paraphrase I am thinking of now is not what is usually so called. It is not, on the one hand, the mere skeleton of the poem, the bare thought minus the emotion and the music; nor is it, on the other hand, the poem itself, deprived of its metrical character by the transposition of words. A good paraphrase still reflects the characteristics of poetry, its thought, its emotion, its music; but all these are lowered in intensity; the thought is expanded, the emotion subdued, the music less palpable. We have what is sometimes called a poem in prose, beautiful in proportion to the beauty of the verse it displaces, but differing from it in kind, and perhaps with hardly a word in common. If you ask what can be made of a paraphrase, look at the authorized version of our English Bible, and tell me what there is in modern verse that can compare for a moment with even our prose translations of Job or Isaiah!

And this brings me to one last point. Will you bear with me if I touch on it? I have spoken of poetry as the language of feeling, as in turn the expression and suggestion of varied human emotion. But I cannot forget that it has expressed other things than these; that it has embodied, not grief and fear and love alone, but the aspiration, the devotion, the self-consecration that make up religion. It is good that our children should be stirred, even dimly, by emotions such as these, and learn to love and to echo the melodies that enshrine them. But, I fear that the poetry of our Bibles, the fine prose-poems of our English paraphrase, have fared little better at our hands than other poetry. Here, too, "we murder to dissect." We overlay them with comment and criticism and weary explanation, till the music and the passion die out of them, and nothing remains but barren prose-true, perhaps, for the intellect, but with no hold on

the memory, no message to the heart. Would it not be well if-for the little ones, at least-we sometimes let Psalm, and Parable, and Song shine by their own light, and fulfill their own sweet office? The lessons thus taught are of the kind that strike home earliest and linger longest; they do what argument cannot do, and appeal to faculties more worth reaching than any that it can reach. For intuition is greater than reason, and love than knowledge.

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