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VERSE MAKING IN OUR SCHOOLS

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I suppose every one that has read Macaulay's Essay on Milton, was, upon his first reading, struck with the following lines:

"Language, the machine of the poet, is best fitted for his purpose in its rudest state. Nations, like individuals, first perceive and then abstract. They advance from particular images to general terms. Hence, the vocabulary of an enlightened society is philosophical, that of a half civilized people is poetical . . . In a rude state of society, men are children with a greater variety of ideas. It is, therefore, in such a state of society, that we may expect to find the poetical temperament in its highest perfection."

If Macaulay is correct in his analogy, and I believe that he is, there is no time that is better fitted for the first lessons in verse construction than the early years of a child's school life. At the age of ten, he illustrates to a high degree of excellence certain qualities of the poetical temperament. Like primitive man, he is vividly imaginative, spontaneous in expression, essentially emotional, and rhythmic in the revelations of many of his emotions. Through his imagination, unhindered in these early days by a strong sense of reality, he is enabled to discover in nature about him all manner of poetic similitudes. Natural objects form for him, as for his early forefathers, not a mere background, but living things capable of human emotions. And he does not regard the objects of nature simply as alive, apart, to be admired, and wondered at: he thinks of them as fellow creatures:—

"There was a Boy; ye knew him well, ye cliffs
And islands of Winander!—many a time,
At evening, when the earliest stars began
To move along the edges of the hills,
Rising or setting, would he stand alone,
Beneath the trees, or by the glimmering lake;
And there with fingers interwoven, both hands
Pressed closely palm to palm, and to his mouth
Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,
Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls,
That they might answer him—"

Like primitive man, moreover, the child illustrates the poetical temperament by reading into natural phenomena, simple stories of heroism and adventure, and imaginative qualities of the most varied kinds. Alone or with other children, he usually interprets nature in this wise. Spontaneity, too, is as natural to him as his very being. In his earliest years, he is enthusiastic to express the ideas that come teeming into his mind, for the shades of the prison house have not yet begun to close about him, and custom, gray with ages grown, has not weighed him down. The dream world and the real world are all one to him. He imagines, therefore, all manner of fantastic things, and delights in telling his tales, when the mood strikes him, to any one or to anything that he finds close at hand.

In no manner, however, does the child illustrate more perfectly the poetical temperament found in a half civilized people than in his feeling for rhythm. The experience of Pope—

"As yet a child, nor yet a fool to fame,
I lisp'd in numbers, for *the numbers came*"—

is, with poetic geniuses and savage people alike, according to Dr. Chamberlain, almost universal. Dante, he tells us, wrote sonnets at the age of nine; Wieland created an epic while yet a youth; Lope de Vega composed verses at twelve; and Poe wrote his "To Helen" while a mere boy. We usually read such statements with wonder, because in our time, we felt that he who can "lisp in numbers," "as yet a child," must surely be a prodigy! Not so among primitive men! "Children make songs for themselves," says Miss Alice Fletcher in her article on Indian Songs, "which are occasionally handed down to other generations." In speaking of African folk tales, Mr. Chatelain says of the Angola natives, "No Angola child finds difficulty at any time in producing extemporaneous song." Crawford, who translated the *Kalevala*, the great Finnish epic, says, "The natural speech of this people is poetry. The young men and maidens, the old men and matrons in their interchange of ideas, unwittingly fall into verse." And Dr. Chamberlain claims that "among the young herdsmen and shepherdesses of the pastoral peoples of Europe and Asia the same precocity of song prevails." During early youth, therefore, the child should receive his first instructions in verse making; for, it is then that he possesses abundantly, as we have seen, certain vital qualities of the poetical temperament,—imagination, sensitiveness to the beauty of nature, spontaneity and a feeling for rhythm.

But why should we instruct the child in a kind of com-

position he may seldom, if ever, use? There are many answers, it seems to me, to this question. In the first place, as Mr. Henry G. Pearson has said, "The ordinary school boy has come to look upon poetry as a relic of prehistoric times, to comprehend which long study and the patient training of a specialist are needed and which no longer serves any purpose except possibly that of idle amusement." If the child were trained to imitate the simplest work of the great masters at the time he is reading their ballads, or their short, direct narrative poetry, and while he is yet by nature a poet in temperament, he would soon catch the charm of such a method of telling his own stories. Poetic composition would no longer appeal to him as a form to be used only by "the specialist"—he would see that he too could cast his thoughts into verse form. The ordinary child, moreover, takes an especial delight in making rimes. He is stimulated, particularly if he meets with any degree of success, to attempt all manner of verse connected with school life and the activities about him. Some of my boys have shown unusual interest in writing advertising verse, school songs, and humorous verse dealing with the experiences of fellow classmates. Students taking both History and English, who might be at a loss if asked to write an original narrative in verse, have composed, with enthusiasm and success, "historical poems," dealing with such subjects as "The Defeat of Harold," "The Penance of Henry II;," "The Destruction of the Armada," etc. Events thus expressed are much more likely to be remembered than if they are narrated in the usual prose form; and a new interest too seems to be correspondingly aroused in the History classes.

Verse making affects, moreover, the work done in the literature classes. I have noticed, after a course in verse composition, an increased enthusiasm among my own pupils in the analysis of such poems as the *Ancient Mariner*, *The Prisoner of Chillon*, and the *Vision of Sir Launfal*, as masterpieces of literature. The writing of narrative verse, it would seem, had borne direct fruits in the study of poetry for appreciation.

Probably, however, no subject is more directly helped by exercises in verse composition than reading. Many children, who read prose fluently, read poetry in a very halting fashion. I take it that all agree that naturalness is the most important requisite to good reading. Poetic composition, at present so remote from the child's ordinary mode of expression, fills the young, inexperienced interpreter with self-consciousness as he reads. Naturalness is thus lost. The ends of the lines,

all marks of punctuation, and the rime and accent give him no end of trouble. I have in mind a boy, who is not a fluent sight reader. Not long ago he was asked to recite in his elocution class, and, not having learned a poem, he gave his own, *The Death of the Red King*, which he had that week composed for the History class. He was so filled with the meaning of what he had written that all of the mechanical difficulties dropped away and he won the applause of both teacher and fellow students. Since that day he seems to have caught the spirit of rhythmic expression, and his difficulty in the reading of poetry seems to have been solved.

In imitating poetic masterpieces, the child, moreover, vitally realizes the value of sound effects produced by the careful choice and placing of words. Figures of speech, too, take upon themselves an added meaning. The youthful verse-maker sees the increased force which they give to his thoughts. He appreciates in verse-making especially the appropriateness of the use of metaphors, similes, and the various other figures in securing vivid effects. Exactness in the meaning of words, accent, the number of syllables, and the quantity of vowels, all assume a new aspect to him if his teacher uses a direct and simple method in analyzing the poems to be imitated. The mechanics of verse-making thus appeal to him in a practical way and he no longer looks upon them if, for instance, he swings into the spirit of creating a school song, as so much dead material to be mastered before he can accomplish his purpose.

Thus far I have tried to show: (1) that the qualities of the poetical temperament are to be found in a free but undeveloped state in the child; and (2) that they should be developed through constant expression in verse composition, in order, (a) to eradicate the impression that poetic expression is a thing foreign to his nature, (b) to stimulate him to express himself freely in various kinds of simple verse upon subjects dealing with outside activities and with school subjects, (c) to increase his enthusiasm for the study of poetic masterpieces, (d) to aid him in the reading of poetic masterpieces and, (e) to teach him the simple elements of prosody through their immediate application.

Before passing to the second division of my subject—the method of teaching verse construction—I wish to submit two “poems,” one by a child of nine, and the other by a boy of fourteen. Both caught their inspiration from nature and both illustrate a real spirit of comradeship for the things they write about.

Hiss, hiss! I wish I were a turtle,
 A slow and lazy turtle, living in a wood,
 Eating bugs and worms and flies,
 Winking with my small red eyes,
 And my shell I would not sell
 The price be what it could.

Gug, mug! I wish I were a bull frog,
 A green and slimy bull frog, croaking in a marsh,
 With my flat and golden ear,
 Every little sound I'd hear,
 Dive with glee where none could see,
 And croak in a voice quite harsh.

Hop, jump! I wish I were a rabbit,
 A gay and frisky rabbit, running where I please,
 Laughing at the trap and gun,
 Hopping, jumping in the sun,
 In the wood or where I could
 I'd live quite at my ease.

* * *

There are those who love the ocean's waves,
 The white-capped billows' surging roar,
 Their hearts' content to yacht all day
 Or bathe or bask along the shore.

Some make their choice the mountain dell
 Ensconced by forest's stately green,
 They paddle on the crystal lake
 And hunt wild game in joy serene.

But I love most the country-side
 'Mid gurgling brooks and flowers fair,
 To wander 'neath the shady oaks
 And breathe the sweet refreshing air.

And when with gold the leaves are tinged
 I gather chestnuts on the hill,
 Or shake the pippins from the trees,
 And drink sweet cider at the mill.

I love to hunt the cunning quail,
 With two good setters at my heels,
 In thicket dense or by the marsh,
 My rifle often sharply peals.

I canter through the shady lanes,
 All vegetation fresh with dew,
 And revel in fair nature's charms,
 In early morn revealed to view.

The sea shore may be very fine—
 The mountains good for healthful rest,
 But I combine them all in one—
 The country-side I love the best.

There are doubtless many good methods of teaching verse structure and many ways of stimulating a desire in the child

to write in rhythmic language. None of us would thoroughly agree as to a "best method." So much depends upon our course of study, upon our pupils, upon our own enthusiasm for various kinds of poetry. The following teaching plan, worked out, with my help, by Mrs. Ida Gilbert Myers, former assistant superintendent of public schools, Washington, D. C., may prove suggestive. The scheme was made for use with boys of about fourteen. I submit the plan somewhat abridged, omitting many of the details dealing with the close relation between song-making and verse-making.

INTRODUCTORY LESSONS

I. Sing, with the mind given entirely to the swing and movement of these songs:—My Country 'Tis of Thee, The Marseillaise, Annie Laurie, Abide With Me, etc. Question from the musical score for the tempo in which each is written. Select the measures that literally follow this time plan, i. e., if the time signature is 3-4, select those measures that conform strictly to this plan by each being made up of three-quarter notes. Select the measures that have the same value but vary from this plan. Show the effect of this variation upon the expression of the song idea.

II. Write several of the stanzas of each of these songs, without the music, upon the board. Strike, or mark, each of the words or parts of words, accented in the singing, as—

Mine eyes have seen the glôry of the coming of the Lórd.

Question to reveal the importance of these accented words in expressing the thought. Have the number of accents in the first line counted and then compare the number of accents in each of the other lines with this line. Show that these regularly recurring accents give to the song its cadence and movement. To develop this idea further, copy upon the board the first stanza of—Wordsworth's "O Nightingale, Thou Surely Art," Holmes' "Spring Has Come," Tennyson's "The Owl." Show what words by their importance take a natural emphasis, upon what syllable the accent falls, and what syllables are touched lightly. Discuss then the number of lighter syllables accompanying generally an accented one. Show that in these poems the first line furnishes the pattern for the other lines in the stanza.

III. Read a few stanzas now of any simple nature or narrative poems to bring out the accent. Explain the terms *scanning*, *rhythm*. Scan a piece of lyrical verse, say for instance, Shakespeare's "Hark, Hark the Lark," and then read the poem naturally, making the proper pauses, crescendos, inflections, etc. Show that the effects produced in this second reading are secured, as in singing, by a variety in the dis-

tribution of time values, rests, tones of voice, etc. Bring out, however, that in both readings rhythm is the essential quality. Show by a *brief* history of English verse that it is rhythm and not rime that distinguishes poetry from prose. Scan various simple poems to explain more in detail the time plan of the line, the general plan of the stanza. Show the rhythm in the Psalms. Have the pupils copy Psalms I, XXIII, and C in the form of poetry.

VERSE-MAKING

I. The changing of prose selections into poetry. Method—Select the thought for the first line. Establish the movement, or time scheme, of this line in the following manner: *a*, Arrange the important words so that these give the place and number of accents in this line; *b*, Divide the line into measures by placing a bar before each of these accented words; *c*, Complete each measure by adding unstressed syllables or words. The thought being given, the purpose of this exercise is to select and arrange the words expressing this thought in such a manner that each line expresses a rhythmical movement. When the plan of the first line has been determined upon, use it as a pattern upon which to build the rest of the stanza. Material—Change into simple prose a stanza of unfamiliar poetry dealing with a theme near to a child's life. After the exercise has been performed compare the pupil's work with that of the original poetic selection.

II. Show now that a stanza of a poem is like a paragraph in the writing of a prose composition. Write the material for a short poem of about four stanzas upon the board. Determine upon the beginning and the end of each stanza. Write the stanzas following the suggestions in I.

III. Rime—Write upon the board the first stanza of "Snow Bound." Review the rhythm. Question for similar or parallel words. Show where they are placed. Explain how they are similar, how dissimilar. Examine a few lines of blank verse to show again that rime is not an essential characteristic of poetry. Study many poems to show various riming schemes.

IV. Rime continued—Examine many groups of riming words. Show what parts of these words agree exactly in sound; which parts agree exactly in letter; in what respect alone these similar words differ. Explain that a perfect rime requires exact coincidence of terminal consonant sounds as *m-ind*, *k-ind*. Give many such base words upon which perfect rimes can be made. Have pupils construct such rimes. Explain the difference between these strong, masculine rimes and weak, feminine rimes.

V. As in I, Verse-Making, write prose material upon the board to be changed into one stanza riming poetry. After pupils are able to write a single riming stanza, work with a series of stanzas developing a single theme. Follow a simple riming plan at first and then later work with various riming schemes.

VI. Atmosphere—Show how the subjects of several selected poems are suitable to poetic expression. Develop the effect of the use of figures of speech. Notice the arrangement of words, phrases and clauses in securing rhythm, smoothness, and beauty of expression. Study the choice of words in creating color effects. Notice the effects of repetition and the use of the refrain.

VII. Examine any half dozen ballads. Explain the main characteristics of such poems. (A simple discussion of this subject is to be found in the Introduction of Ballads and Ballad poetry by Professor E. E. Hale, Jr., Globe School Book Co., New York). Write several incidents from "Ivanhoe" in ballad form. Have suitable Biblical stories treated in the same manner.

VIII. Additional exercises—Examine Christmas and Easter verses. Compose suitable verses for such occasions. Study advertising verse. Show how it differs from other verse in purpose, in expression. Examine school and college songs. Show the spirit, the purpose, and underlying plan of these. Have short school songs composed. Correlate the work done in the literature classes with verse-making. Example—If the class is studying the "Idylls of the King," have several of the stories told by Malory, but not by Tennyson, developed into blank verse following the model of the "Idylls."