

ON THE TEACHING OF POETRY

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On the teaching of poetry by Alexander Haddow

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ALEXANDER HADDOW

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OF POETRY**

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BY

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CONTENTS

| CHAP. | | Page |
|-------|---|------|
| | INTRODUCTION - - - - - | vii |
| I. | THE PRACTICAL IN TEACHING - - - - - | 1 |
| II. | QUALIFICATIONS OF THE TEACHER OF POETRY - - - - - | 5 |
| III. | CHOICE OF THE POEM - - - - - | 12 |
| IV. | HOW TO INTRODUCE THE POEM - - - - - | 18 |
| V. | HOW TO READ THE POEM - - - - - | 25 |
| VI. | METHOD OF TEACHING THE POEM - - - - - | 32 |
| VII. | HOW TO HELP THE PUPILS TO READ POETRY - - - - - | 60 |
| VIII. | BEAUTY IS TRUTH - - - - - | 80 |
| IX. | CONCLUSION - - - - - | 104 |

INTRODUCTION

This book is intended for students in training, or for young teachers of English in any department of the school who have not yet found their feet. In the variety of the work which is suddenly thrust upon them when they enter the schools, their greatest difficulty is to find a path through the work, and see the ideal to which it leads. How often young teachers are worried with the question: "Is this the right way?" When they know, or think they know, the method to follow, the rest is easy. *Ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte.* Believing as I do that nothing is so important as to set out in the right direction—that once they have their foot on the right road the future is their own—I have attempted to set up an ideal in the teaching of poetry, and to indicate lines of approach.

I have chosen this subject because, if I have anything to say worth saying on the method of teaching English, it is on this department of the work, and if I fail here I need go no further. In it I have spent many of the happiest hours of my life, and hope to

spend many more. I think, at times, of Shaw's epigram: "Those who can, do: those who cannot, teach." If we could write poetry no doubt we would do so, and leave the teaching to others. If we only love poetry, but cannot write it, then we teach. Yes, but teaching is also doing, and it is because I have felt that in teaching poetry I was, in the fullest sense, doing, that I have found it so satisfying. "Life's inadequate to joy, as the soul sees joy," says Cleon. Teach a poem, as it should be taught, and see the flash in your pupils' eyes as the living beauty of the poem goes home to their hearts, and you will find that life is adequate to joy. Certainly, at the end of a lesson on poetry, Shaw's epigram has seemed to me merely a clever futility. He never knew the teacher's joy in doing.

But there is another reason for beginning with poetry. If I had to test a teacher of English by his work in any one branch of the subject I would choose this. It is the highest work he has to do, that which demands most of him. If he can teach poetry he can teach any other department of the subject if he will; but he may teach other departments of the subject well and fail with poetry.

We hear frequently the complaint that modern education seems to lead nowhere, that much of the money spent upon it is simply wasted. The taxpayer looks for a fair return for his money, and, when he fails to find it, condemns education as not being sufficiently practical. This opens up a big question which

I do not mean to tackle. But I wish to state that I aim at treating my subject in an entirely practical way. It seems to me that poetry ought to be taught in a practical manner, that so taught it will give the taxpayer an abundant return for his money, and that many of the methods used at present amply justify the complaints that are made. In saying this I know I am inviting criticism. As I have to deal with students entering the teaching profession, criticism will be most helpful. If my methods are wrong, the sooner I am told the better, for the methods suggested in this little book are those I strive to impress on the young teachers under my charge.

When I think of what I have written, I imagine two different classes of critics rising up against me—those who consider me a mere theorist, and those who object to my strictures on teachers. The former wish to know what practical experience, if any, I have, that I, a lecturer in a Training College, presume to speak. To these I offer the following summary of my practical experience: I was for four years a Pupil Teacher, and for five years an Elementary Teacher; I spent eight months teaching in a French High School, eight and a half years as Head of the English Department in a Secondary School, and nine and a half years as Headmaster of a combined School containing firstly, Higher Grade and Elementary Departments and, latterly, Higher Grade and Advanced Division.

The latter, on the other hand, urge that I have been too severe upon teachers, too ready to condemn. To

this I can but reply that the person who is most often in the dock is my past self, and that if I seem to condemn with confidence, it is because I feel confident that I know now where and why I failed in the past. I have written here what I imagine would have been useful to myself as a beginner, in the hope that it may help some other beginner.

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CHAPTER I

THE PRACTICAL IN TEACHING

When we think of education and of much of the criticism passed upon it, we find that many of the faults in both spring from the same cause. We find teachers with no clear idea as to what they should aim at, employing methods for which they can give no real defence. Their work might be summed up in Pope's couplet:

“ And he, who now to sense, now nonsense leaning,
Means not, but blunders round about a meaning.”

On the other hand we find critics with very definite ideas as to what they want from education, criticizing teachers and their product. Unfortunately the critics are often as far wrong as the teachers. They do not see that what they expect from the teacher is often