

Wordsworth's Theory of Education.

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The Scottish author and critic, Dr. Moir, says of Wordsworth: "Never, perhaps, in the whole range of history, from Homer downwards, did any individual, throughout the course of a long life, dedicate himself to poetry with a devotion so pure, so perfect, so uninterrupted as he did. It was not his recreation, his mere pleasure, it was the main, the serious, the solemn business of his being. It was his morning, noon and evening thought, the object of his outdoor rambles, the subject of his indoor reflections, and as an art he studied it as severely as ever Canova did sculpture, or Michael Angelo painting." He was a master of his art, giving to the world his message of love of Nature, God and Man through the realm of beautiful verse. Poetry was the channel through which the stream of noble thoughts and sentiments flowed from the still, placid waters of his own deep mind to the generation of today.

Wordsworth speaks of poetry as "the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science," and as "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge." Keats, beautiful and impassioned poet as he was, scorned the

idea that a poem should bear a lesson. To him, poetry was but the expression of sensuous beauty. Wordsworth claims that the poet's function is to

"help life onward in its noblest aims." He tells us that his purpose was "to teach the young of every age to see, to think, and therefore to become more securely virtuous." Writing to Sir George Beaumont he says, "The poet is a teacher. I wish to be considered as a teacher or as nothing."

To Wordsworth, learning meant the growth of the body, the development of the soul, and the unfolding of the spirit. Growth is gradual. The body and mind attain their perfect proportions by slow and even processes; the development of the soul keeps pace with the physical and mental growth; and the unfolding of the spirit, in all its majesty and power is complete only when the mind and soul have reached their zenith. This development is largely a matter of environment and training. While it is true that in many respects environment is relative to individuals, investigation has proved that certain conditions are far more favorable than others to the

growth of the delicate organisms of the human body, and the undeveloped cells of which the childish brain is composed. What are these conditions, and how shall we proceed to attain the perfect development of the body, mind and soul?

William Wordsworth, the Priest of Nature, has given us a theory of education so broad, and yet so simple in its conception that the vast majority has failed to grasp its power and significance. He arrives at his conception of the processes of mind growth by the study of his own development. In the Prelude

"-----the discipline

And consummation of a poet's mind,
In every thing that stood most prominent
Have faithfully been pictured."

The basis of his theory is nature. Born in the beautiful lake region of the Cumberland hills, from his very infancy he was subjected to the direct influence of nature in her wild and rugged grandeur, in her soft and tranquil beauty. Her ruggedness became his strength, her sublimity his deep, calm mind, her grandeur his noble, lofty soul. What better exponent of Nature's educating power could

we find than he whose whole being is permeated with her divine influence? Looking upon this finished pupil of her rustic school, can we hesitate to place our children under her care and guidance?

Wordsworth says,

"The child is father of the man."

This is a physical, mental and moral truth. The child with the healthy body, the clear mind, and the pure heart will be the man of strong physique, of mental power and of noble life — a force in the world for good. It has been found by scientific experiment that the development of animals is relative to the amount of space available during the growing period. The city, with its want of room, pure air and sunshine can not be conducive to the best development of the countless thousands of little bodies and souls within its walls.

To the country then we must turn with

Wordsworth. With its unknown boundaries, its untold beauty, its warmth of life and color, its wealth of light and shade, its swift-changing panorama of seasons, the country appeals to the senses as the city never can.

There is a freedom from restraint, an

impulse to activity which Nature alone can give. Wordsworth grasped the elementary truth of the philosophy of education — that the mind develops only by its own activity. That the individual must be free in a sense contrary to confinement, and that the unfolding of the faculties of the mind follow a natural order a natural method. This is true of the body and soul as well as of the mind. Without activity there can be no growth in any line. The body or mind unexercised cannot expand, but must become dwarfed and useless. How, Wordsworth asks, could the little meadow flower unfold its lovely blossom to the warm kiss of the sun if it were not as free as the air above it, and as fearless as the bird which sings in the boughs above it? The grandeur of the forest tree — could that be attained "by casting in a formal mold"? No, it can only grow in beauty and strength by virtue of its "own divine vitality".

But while advocating freedom from restraint, Wordsworth does not imply that discipline is not necessary. On the contrary it is of vital importance that the impulses of the child shall be carefully guided in the

right direction, toward the formation of a strong character. There is no more pitiable sight than that of a child of bright, quick intellect losing the opportunity of becoming a power for advancement in the world because he has become a creature of impulse and passion. Wordsworth has clearly shown how sport and play are important factors in education, but he also shows how necessary is discipline.

"The congregating temper that pervades
Our lapse years, not wasted, should be taught
To minister to works of high attempt—
Works which the enthusiast would perform with love."

Speaking of his own childhood, Wordsworth says that his soul had fair seed time, fostered alike by the beauty of nature in her calmness, and by the fear she inspired in her aspects of power and strength. The narrative of his childhood days is most vivid, realistic and beautiful, and the mind developed amid such sublime scenes can not but be noble and pure. From the teachings of his childhood he draws the motto of his life, "Plain living and high thinking."

"Our daily meals were frugal, Sabine fare!
More than we wished we knew the blessing then."

"Of vigorous hunger - hence the corporeal strength
Unscathed by delicate veins."

It was this wholesome living, together with an active life which formed the strong healthy body that enabled him to give his best to the world - the work of a mind unfettered by bodily pain.

Wordsworth condemned severely the methods of instruction common to the schools of the day. And the system has improved so little in vital points even in our day that we may with profit take his criticisms to ourselves. He had no sympathy for the methods of doctrinaires and examining boards; for the methods which crushed out the original and poetic spirit by cramming the mind with mere book instruction. The ideal education aims to develop an individuality of mind. The growing mind has periods of reception and assimilation. When proper time is given for assimilation of the knowledge received, the mind strengthens and expands, and the element of originality is attained. But the mind crammed with fact upon fact, process after process, becomes narrow and cramped, and loses all individuality. The victim of such instruction may be able to

perform astonishing feats of memory, but he has little or no comprehension of the meaning of the knowledge impressed upon his brain as a pattern is stamped upon leather. Wordsworth draws a realistic picture of such an intellectual monstrosity.

- - - - - he can read

The inside of the earth, and spell the stars.
 He knows the policies of foreign lands,
 Can string you names of districts, cities, towns,
 The whole world over, tight as beads of dew
 Upon a gossamer thread."

He paints also a scornful word picture of the cause of this "unnatural growth" — they who have solved the future and tamed it to their bidding; who manage not only books, but things, causing them to react upon the infant mind as the sun upon a flower, first opening the petals wide by genial warmth, then withering and dwarfing by the increasing heat of his rays. It follows, "as the night the day," that the mind trained by such a one must have an unnatural development, its power for the best, and strongest work destroyed. The mind then becomes a mere machine, doing the routine work of every other mind so trained.

Wordsworth would have us "teach as Nature teaches." Instead of the hourly supervision and constraint described in the following lines,

"--- ever as a thought of purer birth
Rises to lead him toward a better clime,
Some intermeddler still is on the watch
To drive him back, and pound him, like a stray,
Within the pinfold of his own conceit."

Wordsworth would substitute freedom of thought and action, with the gentle restraining influences of the Divine law as revealed in Nature. He believed that Nature was given us as a teacher and guide, especially during those years when the mind and heart are most susceptible to the influences surrounding them. In his description of the "unnatural growth," he says,

"Meanwhile old grandame earth is grieved to find
The playthings which her love designed for him,
Unthought of; in their woodland beds the flowers
Weep, and the river sides are all forlorn."

By association with Nature, both as revealed in the outside world and in man, the latent capabilities are developed, and the seeds of self-control and self-dependence sown. The real function of the teacher is to guide and direct, but at the same time to throw the child largely upon its own

resources, thereby making it selfconfident and independent. As an illustration of the natural teacher Wordsworth bids us behold the hen with her brood of chicks: She does little more than move about with them in love and watchfulness, "a center to the circle which they make," now and then scratching up a morsel herself to stimulate and encourage them.

Wordsworth believed in experience as a teacher; that the child should learn the world by actual contact with it—should learn of love and hate, joy and sorrow, peace and pain, by feeling all in their individual lives. He and his playmates were children trained in this way.

"A race of real children; not too wise,
Too learned, or too good; but wanton, fresh
And bandied up and down by love and hate,
Not unresentful where self justified;
Fierce, moody, patient, venturesome, modest, shy;
Mad at their sports like withered leaves in winds;
Though doing wrong and suffering, and full oft
Bending beneath our life's mysterious weight
Of pain, and doubt, and fear, yet gilding not
In happiness to the happiest upon earth."

And Wordsworth realized the great blessing it had been to him to be reared in Mother Nature's nurseries.

" — — — — — yet I rejoice
 And, — — — — — will pour out
 Thanks with uplifted heart, that I was reared
 Safe from an evil which these days have laid
 Upon the children of the land;
 meaning the educational system as employed in
 the schools.

Woodsworth believed that Nature would
 develop not only the desirable traits already
 alluded to, but that under her influence the
 emotional side of man's nature is strengthened
 and purified, and the seed of genius in every
 soul find here the warmth and light necessary
 to germination and growth. He says that the two
 attributes that constitute her strength are the
 the gifts of emotion and of calmness which she
 bestows upon her followers. These are her
 glory. Genius thrives by interchange of moods
 of excitement and of peace. Hence he will find
 in Nature his truest friend, receiving from
 her ever generous hand the quietness of mind
 which fits him to receive the revelations of
 truth which comes to his entranced mind,
 and the energy by which he throws off the
 shackles of custom and conventionality, and
 searches ever deeper and farther for the real and true

Wordsworth had strong within him the spirit of democracy, but he was in advance of his age in that he realized the the only sure basis of a great democracy is enlightened citizenship. He was the first to assert that the best education the state can give is the right of every man.

"O for the coming of that glorious time
When, prizing knowledge as her noblest wealth
And best protection, this imperial Realm
----- shall admit

An obligation, on her part, to teach

Those who are born to serve her and obey.

Wordsworth believed that the good citizen is the good man — without true manhood good citizenship could not be. He teaches that noble thoughts and great deeds are the fruits of an educated mind, and that ^{the} country which neglects the education of its people is in danger. Without cultivation of the intellect there can be no upward and onward progress. His sympathies were all with the suffering humanity of France until the reign of ~~Napoleon~~ began. Then when he saw how cruel and bloody an oppressor France had become, his anger and pity turned to the interest of the oppressed nations.

He says of France at this time that there was
"equally a want of books and men."

For his own country he would have every child within its borders educated, enabled to deal intelligently with every question of government.

Wordsworth believed that the ultimate end of education is character, and his ideal of character is a lofty one. In his "Happy Warrior" we find his ideal strongly pictured, and from other poems we find that the prime elements of character were, to him, a "blunt indifference", a stourness which should be dignified and self respecting, honor which could know no dishonor, true affection and true piety.

Character depends on moral nature. There is no wealth, no fame can take the place of this essential to good character - pure morals.

"Who knows the individual hour in which

His habits were first sown, even as a seed?"

How important it is then that the child be surrounded with all pure and noble influences. How great an influence upon the character Nature can have we find well illustrated in Wordsworth's own life. Pure hearted, noble soul, he a typical child of Nature. What is pure can have but a purifying influence. Nature

"Which is but the breath of God,

Or His pure word by miracle revealed,"
can only uplift and noble. In her there is no dross. All is refined and pure.

"Low desires,

Low thoughts. had there no place."

Nature's inspiration to higher thoughts and nobler lives is a theme for song with Wordsworth. In the Prelude we find many tributes to Nature's inspiring influence with himself. Wordsworth was a lover of mankind, ever ready to serve his fellow men, throwing himself into the struggle of the suffering and oppressed with all the ardor of a great heart. and this love he attributes to Nature's influence.

"My thoughts by slow gradations had been drawn
To human kind, and to the good and ill
Of human life, Nature had led me on."

"For I have learned

To look on Nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still sad music of humanity."

So Wordsworth teaches that Nature, being the outward manifestation of God, communion with her must lead the soul heavenward.

A fitting summing up of Wordsworth's theory of education is contained in the following lines from the Prelude.

"Simplicity in habits, truth in speech,
Be these the daily strengtheners of their minds

"May books and Nature be their early joy!
 And knowledge rightly honored with that name
 Knowledge not purchased by the loss of power."

"But in the mountains did he feel his faith.
 — — — — — all things there
 Breathed immortality, revolving life,
 And greatness still revolving infinite;
 There littleness was not; the least of things
 Seemed infinite; and there his spirit shaped
 Her prospects, nor did he believe — he saw.
 What wonder if his being thus became
 Sublime and comprehensive."