SUBJECT MATTER

‘Nous sommes toujours au même point, comment prouver à quelqu’un que la Transfiguration (de Raphaël) est admirable?’

One man may admire this Raphael, another may be bored by it and consider a cabinet photograph of himself in all ways a better work of art. Just relative tastes irreconcilable. Stendhal seemed to accept this as an impasse. The teacher cannot. One adolescent may admire, or enjoy reading Fielding’s Tom Jones, or the Odes of Keats, another dislike these and enjoy and consider of more value the current serial in a morning paper or Kipling’s Barrack-Room Ballads. But if the teacher is going to help in the expression of a self, that self must be as far as possible worth expressing; and he cannot therefore be content that the second of these two should be satisfied with his standard of literary enjoyment. Probably if the adolescent is sixteen to seventeen, he has left any change of taste too late. It should have begun with boyhood. But in any case, the change does not mean that the second adolescent should have identical tastes with the first; he may admire neither Tom Jones nor the Odes of Keats; but he should have, at least, periods in which his mental atmosphere is such that he can understand another’s enjoyment of those works.

It is to that extent that the teacher must aim at
solving the question put by Stendhal. He will not do it by dictating his own admirations: however much he may admire Hopkins, for example, he will not by the subtlest dictated analysis convince a boy that Hopkins is worth more than Cowper, if that boy is more of an extrovert than an introvert, if, that is, temperamentally, the boy looks on life with the more social eye of Cowper. I do not say that the boy’s temperament may not be gradually modified; but this gradual may make the formation of taste less spectacular than some teachers would wish, and not worth their patience. The man, for example, who feels that his aesthetic education was completed by *Women in Love,*—actually nothing should be completed in the teacher—may find that the *Idylls of the King* is the work which most attracts a middle-school class in a middle-class school. He may despair of this unconscious reversion to Victorian snobbishness; but he may be misjudging the causes of the attraction. The *Idylls of the King* may be a sound approach to a desirable aesthetic standard. His reward may come when with the same class, now a sixth, one of them asks him how far one can take seriously the ideas of a novelist, who is also very much of a snob: and when in turn he asks *à propos* of what ideas in particular, he receives the answer, *Women in Love.*

Whatever the heart-searchings over particular authors, and these must be severe, if anything worth while is to come of them, the aim of the teacher is not so much to distribute first, second and third prizes and an occasional championship medal to literary live-stock as to promote pleasure in looking at a good grade of animal; or to put it in another way, he has to induce
qualities which will, when they mature, make their possessor a man of more sensitive tastes, not necessarily a connoisseur of letters, but a man capable to some extent of a detachment from the immediately useful, capable also of more than temporary gratifications: he has to induce a potential state of mind, without which one would no more think of reading a page of Shakespeare instead of going to see an attractive woman on the films than of wasting two hours on a piece of work, when in one you could passably disguise its most obvious defects. There is, of course, room in the world of taste for both Dietrich, or her equivalent, and Shakespeare. I hardly think he would have denied it; but the trouble is that whereas a natural appetite will always readily admit her merits, it is doubtful whether he would be even given a hearing were it not that there is always a certain body of people who are concerned to acquire and retain an imaginative vigilance of mind on the one hand, and on the other a desire to be consistent to some internal unity-in-becoming: people who achieve, as it were, from time to time, an active poise between these tendencies to and from their individual centre. I am rather doubtful of this mechanistic metaphor, but there it is. If it does suggest a definition of culture, it may seem a rather commonplace embodiment of it to the teacher, who would like to be remembered as the man who first stimulated, say, a Rimbaud. But as a working hypothesis of culture, one cannot postulate some formula which would not apply to individuals, in the sense that individuality must be measured by some common human denominator expressible in terms of consciousness. One cannot base
it on unique adventures into the wilderness of the subconscious, or beneath it. Matthew Arnold, writing from the text Sweetness and Light, may not have made many Philistines realise that bourgeois sobriety, like patriotism, is not by any means enough. But I doubt whether he would have made as much impression if he had taken for his text The Acrid and the Dark, or Ulysses in a Waste Land.

To fuse a greater intellectual curiosity—Arnold’s aim—with a greater passion for human perfection, even defined as εὐφυια, is a cultural task which will keep most teachers busy, and seem sufficiently a problem, when they face an average English class, and know that the fusion must be an experience which interests the boy, that is, must be connected with other experiences which interest him. Nor do periodic examinations make the task easier or more what it should be, a pleasure. Those who probe our tastes and pry into our knowledge do not seem able to encourage in us much enlargement of spirit—if I may use a word of rather obscure reference—not as much as a Barra woman gets from the coast-line of her island, which she may sit contemplating for an hour, after she has climbed a hillside and milked her cow. I have heard one of those islanders use of her Atlantic foreshore almost the same words as Charles V of the city of Florence—according to Izaak Walton’s quotation. I have rarely felt the atmosphere of those words in a room from which some examination is about to select additions to our educated classes.

However, I need not dilate on obstacles. The teacher is going to improve taste; he is going to en-
large the range of a boy’s experience by introducing him to others whose experience, recorded in books, we accept as most expressive of human nature at its best or its most imaginative—or to describe it negatively, human nature not expressed in any official or institutional capacity; the teacher will deal with that material under another heading. This introduction, unless it is to be a mere matter of form, must be according to the boy’s understanding and subject to the conditions of his intellectual and emotional growth. Whatever variety the teacher makes in his choice of verse or prose, according to his own personal tastes, to be effective it must be conditioned by the boy’s mental age. And I propose in the following pages to consider this principle in more detail. But, first, I must refer to other limitations of choice: extending over what is read in school.

What is read by a boy out of school is his own choice. It may be affected by the direct or indirect suggestion of the teacher; but it must be as varied as the tastes of the readers themselves. Of the restrictions which may control what is read in school, the following seem to be most important to notice. Quantity is affected by the fact that a boy has usually to learn how to read intelligently even after he has passed the stage when he can decipher words correctly and with ease. In an article on the art of reading Mr Desmond MacCarthy once wrote: ‘I wish those who educated me had drawn my attention to the fact that one reads books with different ends in view: (1) to increase one’s knowledge; (2) to judge them; (3) to enjoy them—and the method of reading proper to
each end is different'. Whether one can separate in this way the purposes for which one reads, might be debated; and in any case the choice of books read under these categories is not a matter for the English teacher alone; but in so far as it is his special function to equip a boy with technical proficiency in his own language, any training in how to read must limit very much the number of books read in school.

In the second place, as one's aim is not only to extend a boy's power in his self—to use Thrting's phrase—through contact with other minds, but also to make that power communicable, reading and expression should be directly related; reading matter may be selected for comparison of similar or dissimilar ideas on a topic which is of real concern to a boy, or for a comparison of their arrangement or the manner in which they are expressed. This alliance between reading and expression will also limit the extent of what is read in school.

Further, the fact that what is read in school will concern a class, limits its selection both in quantity and type: in quantity, because a group does not travel at the pace of its fastest member; in type, because publishers only supply certain types of matter at group prices; and because groups as groups naturally exclude themes or particular treatment of themes which, as individuals, they find to their taste.

This may seem to be a formidable list of restrictions; but there is no virtue in quantity of books read. Books read in common are only the starting-point for individual exploration, and the instrument whereby individual reading may see more clearly both
what is in the lines on a page and what is between them also. One might get rid of the group and flood each individual with a separate assignment of verse and prose; and in return for early and dangerous periods of constipation one would have thrown away the valuable activities of communication.

To prescribe even types of serious reading for any particular school age is a very difficult matter. By serious I mean here that which does not attract simply because it is obviously useful, like *Hints on Constructing a Wireless Set*, or simply because it provides temporary satisfactions, like a crime story: and also I am not concerned here with serious reading related to a special subject such as Geography, Economics and so on, that is, reading for information. The difficulty is that the choice must refer to a standard boy of a particular school age, and so far as I know, there is as little psychological evidence for what may be successfully grafted on to the natural tastes of this standard boy as there is for what we may actually regard as our standard boy from one age to another. If it were less of a difficulty, I think eminent literary minds would have given us more positive information than they have, for our guidance. T. S. Eliot—who is more informative on this point than most of them—devotes to it almost four pages out of a hundred and fifty-six in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. It is true that his book is concerned with the taste of the adult—but even so, it is strange that he should restrict to a note of four pages what he deliberately calls 'the development of taste in poetry'. But perhaps, though there is little positive information in this note, one
should be grateful that Mr Eliot has suggested that there is a difficulty confronting the teacher. Among other true things he says 'the deliberate attempt to grapple with poetry which is not naturally congenial and some of which never will be, should be a very mature activity indeed; an activity which well repays the effort, but which cannot be recommended to young people without grave danger of deadening their sensibility to poetry and confounding the genuine development of taste with the sham acquisition of it. . . . We may even say that to have better "taste" in poetry than belongs to one's state of development, is not to "taste" anything at all. One's taste in poetry cannot be isolated from one's other interests and passions. . . .'

Mr Eliot is here referring to poetry, but as he refrains from defining what poetry is, I feel at liberty to extend the application of his remarks to all that is not naturally and immediately congenial, whether in verse or prose,—taking for the moment Biély's definition of poetry, when he proclaims himself a poet and states that he writes in prose form to save paper! Having done this, I recommend his warning to those who would demand from the immature an application to what is 'yond their experience. It is one thing for a boy to read a book much of which is beyond his understanding, because he is taken by a fancy for the apparently uncongenial, and to get from it gleams of something which touches him with wonder or even an innocent vanity, and to have also a sense of adventure in suggesting a new shape on his vague horizon. It is another to insist on his making a public confession to the effect that what he has been reading is typical of
good English style and its content has interested him from three or even four points of view.

Of course, in introducing an immature to a mature mind successfully much depends on the imaginative sympathy of the individual teacher. One man may interest a class aged eleven in the Coverley papers; another use them as good English nails to adorn a literary coffin. But even though I have seen an apparently successful lesson with a class aged eleven both on Sir Roger de Coverley and on Lamb’s ‘Essay on Roast Pork’—lessons in which the essays have been read with skill—yet they have been rather in the nature of a tour de force. Their apparent success has disguised an unsuitability in choice of material—though I must qualify this statement in respect of the essay on Roast Pork. That is, after all, a tale about a pig, and all animals are interesting to anyone of eleven not actually born inside a generating chamber: but a tale so trellised about with sophisticated humour—humour emerging from at least a dozen different types of adult reaction, that one is not surprised to see the subject trail out a lesson in complete apathy in spite of the pig. The appreciation also of Sir Roger de Coverley depends very much on sensitiveness to shades of social behaviour not only present but past; shades with which we need not trouble childhood, or even more advanced ages.

A similar kind of misfit I should consider the recommendation of Dorothy Osborne’s Letters as reading for a middle-school class—it was recommended in a syllabus for girls, it is true, but however much more mature they are than boys at sixteen, they are not quite mature enough to diagnose the symptoms of a woman in love.
Dorothy Osborne to a certain extent protects her intimacy of feeling with wit and shrewd judgment; but even at that, the discrepancy in understanding between the expressing and the reacting mind seems to turn a unique experience into something resembling a close-up. At any rate, I am grateful to those who neglected to fill my earlier years with systematic lists of reading. Their neglect allowed me to read these letters for the first time, when I was long past either school or university; and by that time I was almost of age to appreciate them.

However, all this is a negative approach to the problem of choice; and what a good many teachers really want is a list of titles age by age and class by class. They can find something to satisfy their hunger in the books on teaching English mentioned in Appendix B. Having satiated themselves, it would be a good thing if then they began gradually to work out the problem of suitable books to their own pattern. If they had to provide for early childhood instead of late boyhood and after, they would find their task much simpler. Nursery Rhymes, Fairy and Folk Tales are children's classics. Verse and prose alike, they contain experience apparently far removed from that of childhood, though at the age to which the first two, at least, appeal, there is so little discrimination in the thought-content of one experience and another, that in a sense it may be said that any experience is natural to a child. What then is the reason why these rhymes and tales are particularly attractive? It might be said that the attractiveness is directly suggested by the adult who recites them. That this is not true seems probable from the
failure of adult suggestion when it attempts to improve on the original. I am inclined to think, and I leave proof to the psychologist, that they attract because they satisfy certain expectations natural to early childhood; I would suggest that as these tend to persist beyond childhood, a word or two in detail about them may not be out of place. They attract by their simple and maximal activity, and clear, broad outline: in the best of them there is nothing superfluous, nothing squeezed. When they use detail, it is in sharp focus and easy to visualise. The actors have, like kittens, great vitality. They are not confined by logic, but they do not strive after the absurd. They are too serious for that: but their seriousness is not always without humour.

' Ba Ba, black sheep, have you any wool?
Yes, sir, No, sir, Three bags full.'

Syntax is their servant, not their master.

' Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle!
The Cow jumped over the moon.'

The scope of their action seems to satisfy the listener—
I dare not venture more than seems—that is, it is inevitable that they should begin, proceed and end as they do.

If the quotations had been written in Greek, and these comments removed to another page, I wonder how many would have taken them as applying to Greek drama; but though a comparison between nursery rhymes and classical drama might tempt one to be ingenious, it also confronts one with an avalanche of a
question, whether there are such things as natural
criteria of taste, and taste then becomes in Rousseau's
uncompromising words 'merely the power of judging
what is pleasing or displeasing to most people'. But
in passing warily by this question, it is interesting to
note that, so far as one can judge from translations,
the work of such modern Russian writers as Babel,
Gabrilovitch and Kataev has much in common with the
nursery rhyme.

To continue a little further with this topic, before
I come to a higher school age,—'the mouse ran up
the clock: the clock struck one: the mouse ran down'.
There is the action; clear of any insecure statement
of motives; but the action, as thus communicated,
runs rather like a mouse without a tail: and the im-
portant tail is 'hickory-dickory-dock'. Add this piece
of nonsense to the sense, and the sense has greater
communicative power. Can one suggest that a symbol
of pure sound may, as an integral part of a poem, make
all the difference to our reactions? At least, this
'hickory-dickory-dock' stresses alliterative echoes in
the words of the action; it stresses the syllabic echo,
rhyme: and it makes the whole start into a bold
staccato rhythm. From which we may gather that the
youthful ear is attracted by verse, when it is obvious
in form; also we may remind ourselves that the boy
begins by being a listener, and for a long time in his
school life he will accept with interest through his ears
what he will not trouble to understand with his eyes.

There are two other points in these early classics I
would like to consider briefly. One is what may seem
to some their flagrant use of repetition; repetition,
for example, of the kind one gets in the story of the three bears: the same action repeated in the same words. There is, of course, variation through the voice of the narrator, but let her change the words, and it will be seen how much of the effect and interest depends on exact repetition. It is as though a change offends some natural sense of order and interrupts the true way to a satisfying climax: as though without the repetition there is not enough emphasis to make an appreciable contrast; or, it may be, the child feels that with too much variation it would lose the pleasure of suspense. Again and again in these tales one has the man with three sons or three daughters, each of whom has very much the same experiences, but two establish a resemblance preparatory to a more effective contrast in the differing third. One of the most popular, and, I think, most successful in form of the Disney Cartoons is the 'Three Pigs': it securely establishes those resemblances without which the final difference would be impossible, and it takes three pigs to do it. Two might theoretically provide a satisfactory contrast, but not in aesthetic practice; and four would be an error in economy. It is little wonder that the number three plays an important part in the arrangement of ideas and their verbal expression. One may say that, of course, repetition is an essential element in all patterns. Even an unskilled ear may detect it in the strong framework of a Beethoven movement, though it may be deaf to the exquisitely sensitive variations. It cannot fail to feel how the recurring 'I' or recurring imperative in some of D. H. Lawrence's poems provide a pattern, even where there are no
artistic variations. But my point here is that the nursery rhyme may attract as much by its form as by its content,¹ and that the attraction of its formal elements may be not restricted to one age; and further, that if we can select for any age material whose form is attractive, it should help to interest a boy in the content itself, even when that does not seem to be immediately congenial but yet is really close to the range of his normal experience. Also I wish to suggest that we may often injure taste through not heeding its simple manifestations.

Finally of the nursery rhyme, it is like the folk tale, a story; and, as such, satisfies what I take to be a desire in the child to project the self into something external to it, as a way of gaining knowledge and stature. The child identifies itself with a fictitious agent and so enlarges its world; and not only the child but the boy, the adolescent and the man also,—as long as he wishes to grow. It is this identification of the self with another which, I suppose, has led some people to withhold from children stories in which the events come in great part from the imagination, and replace them by contact with actual phenomena and meticulous sense training. That is a question concerning which one can only say in passing that a man with a stunted imagination is no greater asset to the world than one with no sense of the actual. But whether or no one admits the imaginative story into the curriculum, one cannot exclude the tendency to self-dramatisation; and intelligently controlled, it

¹ I am assuming here for the sake of convenience that these are separable.
seems to be a power which can be of great use in composition. The recognition that it is there, alone might prevent teachers burdening a class with the task of writing on what has to be written without any compelling intention; for example, many boys who fail before a subject, because it seems too impersonal to be identified in any way with themselves, might well succeed if it was suggested to them to write on such-and-such a thing as if they were so-and-so—that is, if indirectly a definite attitude were suggested. I do not suggest this as a substitute for a suitably chosen topic. A topic is only suitably chosen when one can make it part of oneself.

And further, I would hazard that this power of self-dramatisation may be an aid to imaginative writing of a high order. For example, is it not probable that Keats identified himself with Cortez in the lines:

‘Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific—and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien’—

and it is the completeness of the identification which makes the simile a piece of reality rather than a clever, intellectual figure of speech? One might invent more brilliant similes to end that sonnet, but the intellect does not commit the person, and so only produces a brilliant simile. Is it then impossible that the boy who used this power in expressing himself would not gain an insight into the difference between what one might call, for short, a true and a false figure of speech: that is, the critical distinction might grow, as it were,
out of himself and therefore be his taste, and if he were asked for an explicit judgment later on a so-called figure of speech, the material for it would be in his own mind and the judgment would consequently be made with real mental insight?

This may seem a far cry from the nursery rhyme; but I have taken what might seem to some a negligible thing in the formation of taste, and rightly or wrongly stated ideas about it at length; as a way of suggesting to the teacher that he should be wary of taking ugly ducklings at their face value.

For the age about which a boy enters a secondary school, or a little earlier, the saga or epic in verse or prose and the ballad are usually recommended, and narrative poems of simple heroic action. So far as one can generalise about the boy’s mental growth, this would seem a suitable choice. It is all material in which there is simply plotted action.

Between eight and eleven there is a definite and partly conscious approach to what the adult knows as the actually existing world. By eight or earlier giants are dead: the boy no longer deceives himself that if he makes a mouse out of a handkerchief it will live on Indian corn; but he is still very uncertain how gigantic men may be and what limits there may be to life itself. He is forming a very definite impression about the everyday facts of his domestic circle; he may be quite skilled in its small economies; practical, as a spider, in a small compass; even calculating sharply concerning his own interests; aware that any joint game must have rules, to serve either his protection or his profit. But still, like an explorer, outside his own tidy and familiar
cabin, he has an immense unknown about which he can only be curious; and seeing the fringe of it, is inclined to make wild and satisfying conjectures: especially about its social geography. His father and the reigning sovereign may have similar functions for him—since the advent of the films this salutary confusion has probably been diminished; and though elementary civics now enables him to recognise a policeman by more than instinctive knowledge of his appearance, the policeman has still probably greater executive prestige than a prime minister. Further, as an explorer, he lives on action: he takes his social cues from those who for him represent action. The locomotive and the horse are both picturesque types of action: the driver and the cowboy, who can control such movement, both attract. But of the two the cowboy has more bearing on social development, because through fiction the boy knows more of his dealings with society. The cowboy has also skill with knife, rope and gun; and this manual dexterity probably commands more admiration from most boys than even that of a cricketer or footballer, because it suggests greater power and appeals to the pugnaciously energetic. How far pugnacity in the form of a love of battles is a natural or artificially produced feeling, I cannot say. Certainly most young animals are pugnacious; and when there is a lack of pugnacity in a boy, there is often a somewhat morbid secretiveness. A simple vanity and an innocent cunning—proud Achilles, wily Odysseus—both attractive to the boy are in mimic or recorded warfare combined with the pugnacious. Both the epic and the ballad reproduce these qualities; and for that reason
some might say they were unfit for school reading. But because Napoleon absorbed Plutarch, it does not follow that Plutarch is a source of Napoleonic ambition. Rousseau also absorbed Plutarch; and certainly Plutarch did not inspire him with the rapacity and abuse of human values which were essential to the other. For both Plutarch enlarged the world, and in such enlargement ideals are formed for good or ill. So with the epic and ballad. They enlarge. That in itself would be enough. They breathe a spacious atmosphere free from sophisticated dust. In content they have much that is allied to the boy’s experience; they are the adventures of a poetic world, verging on historical constraints; their characters are sometimes half child, half giant; always in action, always capable of the superhuman and the super-suburban. A Nausicaa, for example, can be both princess and washwoman; and there is an equal simplicity of emotion which, though it conceals a depth beyond the boy’s understanding, yet is free enough from personal intricacies to make him feel at home with them. In expression both epic and ballad are concise, direct and vigorous: like the cinema, they fill space with movement. They deal also with the film material, on which the boy glues a distended eye. But what is melodramatic crime and gangster psychology on the screen, through the filter of a greater mind becomes something of wider human reference. One of the most popular ballads, I suppose, is Macaulay’s ‘Horatius’. It may be a very ‘false gallop of verses’: but it does gallop. It is cinematic to the point of vulgarity; it mixes blood with crude sentiment; but it is boyish, its intellectual
and emotional atmosphere, in so far as they affect the boy, give him a contact with something likely to expand rather than contract his tastes. And though it is a small work compared with Coleridge’s ‘Ancient Mariner’, it may, because it is more intelligible to the boy, because it is a more serious rival to the cinema, actually be a greater power of attraction towards later more serious interests. Refined spirit comes from crude oil; and in appearance one might not suspect any connection.

One may hope that because a boy seems to appreciate a line in a lyric you feel to be a flash of consummate art, he will search assiduously for more: he may, but it is a dubious way to spontaneity of taste. At least the search would seem more of an adventure, if it were attached to an admired personality. Robin Hood, for example, may do more than feast a boy in Sherwood on venison and show him how to outwit oppressors and send him chasing after imaginary deer among back alleys and dustbins. When the boy sees that the brick walls which surround him are no longer a forest of oaks, he may be still loth to relinquish contact with the heroic rebel. As it were in a half-conscious In Memoriam, he has a taste for history, in which the sheriff reappears in all official sobriety: he retains a certain feeling for poetic justice, a healthy suspicion of riches; a sentiment for the green field and open air; possibly a certain topographical zest, a reminder of threading his way through devious woodland paths; but more to our immediate point, he has a watchful eye for any record of the hero’s doings, which may satisfy an affectionate curiosity. And it is possible that many introductions
are made in this way. *Ivanhoe* may lead to *Old Mortality*; Sherwood to Arden, and *As You Like It* to *Anthony and Cleopatra*; ‘All honour to bold Robin Hood’ to ‘Hyperion’; Peacock’s *Maid Marian* to *Crotchet Castle* and a new outlook on the novel, from which eventually some discrimination might be made between *Bleak House, Madame Bovary, War and Peace*, and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. All these ramifications may seem rather fantastic: but an introduction of this kind has personal energy behind it, and that can go a long way.

Incidentally some people complain that the ballad as a type of reading fails to interest a class. In practice I have seen it both succeed and fail. And my own impression is that where it has failed, all one could infer was that it was the teacher and not the class who found the material alien to his taste. It needs some imagination on the part of the average adult to put himself into an age where there are no modern conveniences, or to rush out of a school common-room straight on to the North Sea with Sir Patrick Spens, or from a chat with a headmaster over his fortnightly mark list to a conference in Valhalla or Olympus. On the other hand it is true that once a class has seen a film star masquerading and loping about as an epic hero, with the usual fritterings of sex appeal, the tone of which affects the boy even when he misjudges its meaning, then it is difficult to superimpose any other atmosphere on this layer of impressions.

With the boy round about ten, more use, it seems to me, might be made of the fact that he is at least as much at home with the animal as with the more strictly human
world: in these days one might extend the animal into the mechanical world, in so far as the mechanical world has an emotional bias of its own. For I am not concerned here with selecting material simply for increasing knowledge. A book on nature study may give a boy correct information on the colour of a blackbird's eggs or the habits of an eel; and if such a book is written with the simple directness of a Defoe, it would be excellent as a reader where the reading of a book with a class is needed to improve its ease of reading and understanding at sight, the material being interesting in detail but not urging curiosity on too fast, as happens with a thrilling narrative. But a book of that kind contains matter for the reason and memory rather than the emotions; and it is the approach not merely to an understanding of the emotive value of words but also to contact with the emotional experience of a more than average mind, which needs all the time in school that can be given to it. I am not suggesting that naturalists have not written with an emotional attitude. On the contrary, I think it might be possible to make a selection from such men as Walton, Gilbert White, Fabre, Darwin, Hudson—and probably there are many others of whom I am ignorant—a selection which would be something much more than merely informative. But what I should like to find is a missing Canterbury Tale about a pig; the pig seems to have qualities which demand a Chaucer. We have prose tales about animals which are both of proved interest to boys and are not merely the gratification of a passing appetite: the Jungle Books of Rudyard Kipling, for example; the tales of Seton Thomson also. But we need, though it
is rather late in the day, an English La Fontaine who will write fables without bothering to append a moral. He can include cabs and gudgeon-pins, if he is so minded, as well as tortoises and hares; but the poem of the machine is for adolescence. In the meantime, some adventurous spirit might collect an anthology of poems or fragments, in which bird and beast and stocks and stones are the theme. Prose selections would risk being too near an exegesis and would lack the obvious discipline of verse, and also the thrill of seeing a familiar thing wearing an unusual garment. He would have a hard task. Genius and the school have usually very different aims. And it is also expecting a good deal from the poet that he should bear the boy in mind when he is recording his impressions and experience. There is no lack of poets who have used the animal as a convenient carrier of subjective speculations, or under the pretext of describing it have whiled away a baroque hour. And even when they have respected its objective qualities, the mood of their interpretation often puts too great a distance between their treatment of it and the boy’s familiar impressions. What one wants is something in words, like Velasquez’ ‘Turkey’ in paint, or a fruit from a Chinese brush, or a mallard by Crawhall, or even a Paul Potter bull,—a description, in which the artist has shown such skill of choice and expression that we forget him. What one gets is an abundance of animals, for example in D. H. Lawrence, whose features are drawn with photographic fidelity of detail, but then the picture so daubed with allusions to human nature mechanically suggested one by another, contact between intellect and emotion having failed,
that the result is often just a human grotesque peeping out of animal postures; and, in any case, too symbolically elaborate for the blunt eye of youth: for any eye, in fact, not sharp enough to see a Crucifixion in the mating of a tortoise.

On the other hand, a poem like Wordsworth's 'Cuckoo' takes too much of the bird's natural habits for granted; or rather, though it suggests a very definite feeling towards the bird, uses it too much as a vehicle of a verbal mood to satisfy the objective demands of a boy. Or, again, take the clever poem of Brooke's on the Fish: here there is a certain realism controlled by a certain academic attitude, and for the rest a nibbling at metaphysics, where a boy might expect more about a 'gudgeon'. And so runs the trouble. Burns pities himself in the person of a mouse, Herrick in that of a daffodil: and boys have little use for pity. He wants the animal or vegetable, and not the man. Shakespeare's description of the horse in 'Venus and Adonis'—and even of the hare there also—is sincere dealing with the horse, even though it is but incidental to his main theme. It is not Shakespeare and his alter ego doing a turn in a horse's skin. Though it is somewhat stylised, as in a tapestry, it has still objective life, likely enough to interest a boy: and yet in comparison with Drayton's Polyeolbion, and its lists of birds, for example, it has an atmosphere likely to affect him emotionally.

In spite of the above criticisms, I still feel from the many instances in which poets have written about animals and simple objects of the countryside that a quest for an anthology would be interesting and with
good chance of success. It could not begin better than with John Clare—a rare store of poetic description, in which the thing described, whether turkey, grasshopper, ant, wagtail, yellowhammer, bird and beast or season of the year, is described for its own sake. As a source of suggestion and help in descriptive exercises, I will consider its use further when dealing with method of composition.

Some people might regard such an anthology as somewhat of an anachronism on the ground that the world is rapidly becoming denatured; and man must more and more adjust himself to a scientific systematisation of existence, and just as he was quite ready to look on things through the eyes of Jupiter rather than Prometheus, so he will as readily look to the assembling of a machine as containing the principles on which he should live, to the exclusion of the principles, if we may call them such, on which natural growth still continues. For the time being, at any rate, the boy still is, as it were, in terms of Nature. I base this statement on the response made by town children on all occasions when I have heard them asked to describe or listen to a poetic description of an animal. The earth still had for them apparently playing-fields other than those on which they sweated for health of body and a nominal health of mind. The earth still can correct the insolence of mind that comes of too easy possession of mechanical power. This may seem to have little to do with literary taste. It has much to do with artistic sensibility.

From twelve to fourteen one often finds a novel being read aloud in school. I should say this was an
unsuccessful waste of time. The novel requires usually the pace of the eye working alone. Otherwise, a thing whose importance lies in its continuity, may gall as much as taking a long journey in a train which stops at every station, almost at every signal. Also, the ample space of the novel allows the adult to analyse a motive at his leisure or empty a full pen over a chapter of contingent circumstances. But what the boy still wants, if he can get it, is to know who did what, and how it was done; he also wants to know why; but not at any length likely to interfere with his sense of activity. Of course, if the boy is out of reach of books except at school, then it may be necessary to read a *Treasure Island* or a *Hereward the Wake* in school—I would not say round a class, for to use for reading practice material which should be read for other ends is doubtful economy. Only good readers or the teacher himself should read where continuity of ideas is one of the points a class should learn to realise. Actually, if class reading of fiction were necessary, I should say that an Orczy or a Henty would interfere less with a boy's interest in serious literature than a Stevenson or a Kingsley, though it might do little to arouse such an interest. A boy of thirteen once asked me whether *The Scarlet Pimpernel* was a novel or a play first. A very pertinent question, it seemed. The novel for that age must be a clear pattern of action drawn in the simplest lines, that is, with the greatest economy of words; an economy forced on the play by technical conditions. And it is quite possible to have a novel of adventure, planned on a lower level of thought, structurally and in relative tone values more successful than
one which attempts a higher range of idea and is for that reason included in respectable lists.

At fourteen the boy who reads at all is already a voracious reader. Some boys will swallow a library at that age. He is already becoming sentimental to the extent of preferring to have a flawless heroine all to himself, that is, at the enchanting distance of a printed page. Already before fourteen this hunger for reading is beginning to touch the stomach; and fiction seems to be one of the most natural of private satisfactions. Connection with individual tastes in fiction may be made indirectly through the school library, and better still, through a class library, where that is possible; and also through other ways, which will be considered under method. The success of the connection actually depends less on method than on the general relations of the teacher with his class; no specialist literary qualifications can effect what requires the capacity of the whole man. But I may mention here that his taste in selecting material for oral composition should make a great difference in what the individual reads alone. He can suggest in that way interesting glimpses of an author which arouse a curiosity the individual will want to satisfy for himself. Some men might find it convenient to have a collection of such material; to be used, if necessary, as a reader; and in practice such collections are available for précis and reproduction. They can include material from special subjects,—historical biography, geographical discoveries, nature study and records of scientific research; but it is obvious that such a mixed grill is not likely to be of much value to the
special subjects themselves. Suppose excerpts were taken from Drake’s *Voyage round the World*, Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Cavendish’s *Life of Wolsey*, the *Paston Letters*, Borrow’s *Lavengro*, the *Arabian Nights*, Defoe’s *Great Plague*, Mungo Park’s *Travels*, Cobbett’s *Rural Rides*, *Don Quixote*, a Life of George Stephenson, Darwin’s *Voyage of the ‘Beagle’*, and so on to modern works. Such a selection would not help the specialist teacher. It might be a handicap to the English one: besides having the fault of all such books. They are convenient, but inelastic. At any rate, choice in such material must have regard primarily to its length and its narrative quality. The selections must be of varying length, each, as far as possible, a complete whole in itself; so that the class has to vary its mental focus, and yet not feel that it is dealing with fragments. The narrative must have a clear movement and direction, its contexts plain, even though they carry unfamiliar words, and the more the better up to the limit the context will bear; also, whatever the theme, it should have a fresh contagious mood and whet the imagination. Nothing dead or dying.

This is not a substitute for poetry. At the lowest ebb poetry should still be read, even if it is only to continue or form a habit for something apparently useless. If there is marked apathy to it, it will gain most by being strictly rationed. But one hopes for more than this, from what has been done at an earlier age. And it is a catastrophe if the boy who leaves school at fourteen should leave without some shred of an artistic ideal. He may still have that and dislike poems, but not poetry. One doesn’t expect the average
errand-boy to grow up into a taste for Blake, any more than his double from a public school. But it would not be a national disaster if both of them could temper their cunning in small things with some respect for ideas which reflect the magnitude of the world. One of the most depressing comments on the relation of our public education to culture is the ease with which the not unintelligent, if not academically minded, boy of fourteen becomes in a year or two a being without internal resources, careless in thought, caricaturing all the commonplaceness of middle age: often a lout, usually a prey to opportunist conventions. He leaves school when he is entering critical period of emotional changes. With the school is, mainly an administrative tit-bit, it is doubtful whether he would profit essentially by staying unless he happened to come into contact with some member of the staff who was bigger than the system in which he worked. Fortunately there are many such, here and there. In the meantime, as he leaves at fourteen, if possible, he should leave with some knowledge that the best things in life are not those which you can turn into cash at a moment’s notice. It is difficult for him, conscious of the pressure of an economic system which is based on a sauve qui peut of greed; but employed or unemployed, it will be to his ultimate advantage to learn how to suspect the merely useful.

Having put a heavy responsibility on poetry at this age, I wish I could meet it with confidence in selecting the type of poem which would be in some way attractive and have an influential connection with the future. It should still be in the main narrative; with a direct
current of action, and clearly stressed rhythm: romantic in tone, objective in treatment: of events or people, living in a recognisable historical milieu: or, since I believe the countryside is still attractive material, of country walks or itineraries: or sports and pastimes. But when it comes to naming specimen poems, the fat is in the fire. 'How they brought the good news to Ghent' has a marked rhythm, probably attractive but rather too suggestive of a technical trick; its matter is dramatic and suggests a historical background. But I doubt whether it would leave as influential an impression as 'The Coming of Arthur', and other 'Idylls of the King', suitably expurgated. It is, however, a healthier type of the romantic than poems of Hamlet and Hall by the Mortician of Great Dukes and composer of the 'Revenge' and the 'Charge of the Light Brigade'—both of which on account of their rhythm—Elgar in his most imperial mood,—and their blatant affectation of the shambles, may have a very popular appeal. Most boys have a sneaking eye for the door of a slaughterhouse, and with a touch of the romantic thrown in honour is satisfied. As Tennyson began his 'Idylls' with a eulogy of Albert the Good, so Scott began his 'Marmion' with a eulogy of Pitt. Yet it is a poem which, suitably edited, might have interest for the boy through its rhythm, movement and romantic atmosphere; but again it is merely an introduction to the pomp and circumstance which disguise the petty larcenies of war. It is true that before adolescence the boy is very much a group creature; in so far as he has ideals, they are social ideals; and so one may expect that a poem
should convey to him feelings about justice, honour, courage, discipline, truth. Unfortunately, as poems arousing emotional response to these social qualities are usually, if not necessarily, quasi-historical, the qualities are usually perverted in transmission. On the other hand, if these qualities were poetically represented through the struggle between groups of men with Nature and not with other groups or individuals, they would have to have as romantic an atmosphere for the boy as the poems they displaced. Without that atmosphere the boy, while demanding a direct and objective narrative, would not be convinced if he saw, for example, a recognisable image of adults he knew moving to the dictation of a set rhythm—or to put it in another way, too matter-of-fact an interpretation would merely set up a conflict of comparisons between the little he knew from his own experience and the little he could gather from the fictitious experience. It would lack the idealistic certainties on which his emotions can grow.

Such themes as the struggle of a trawler’s crew with a storm, the work of miners or furnace-men, the building of a railway viaduct, shepherds in the hills, do not lack romance, and at least they are themes in which social virtues are not piously devoted to destruction. Up to date, such or similar themes have not attracted major poets, which is quite intelligible. The man who can construct hell or command fleets probably does not feel enough scope for his power in a furnace or fo’c’sle: he may make an error in judgment about values, but that is neither here nor there, if nothing less than the apparently immense can move
his imagination. Longfellow’s ‘Building of the Ship’ is an approach to the type of poem I have in mind; but it loses itself in sentimentalities. Or if Cowper could have combined his acute observation of the countryside with the narrative power of ‘John Gilpin,’ one might have had the type of Georgic tale which one wanted. A Georgic alone is not enough for this time of life. Many useful selections might be made, for example, from V. Sackville-West’s ‘The Land’, but not too many. The boy wants to be striding alongside a particular plough-horse; or see it shod or help to draw its collar off when it comes in from the fields. A list of veterinary observations on the genus horse would not be the same thing for him, however elegantly made and however apt the passing reflections. He can travel along the Canterbury road because Chaucer was a born story-teller: he can follow Sohrab and Rustum, because Arnold’s self-restraint in words allows him to see a marked path even through unfamiliar names and places.

And after all, since, so far as I can see, a plotted series of actions seems essential, and narrative poetry offers a difficult choice—being often either narrative or poetry—why not read drama itself? It has only one obstacle—it does require a certain standard in reading; and it has many advantages: provided that it is read as in Caldwell Cook’s *Play Way* or with what modifications a teacher finds necessary for his own circumstances. One of these advantages is that it is by nature a social form of expression; another that even in the cramped space in front of a class-room of desks it combines bodily movement with mental exer-
cise: another, that by its mere physical setting it concentrates attention on the meaning of what is read. An epithet or phrase, for example, may, if a class is reading at the desk, pass as an indiscriminate part of the general mass of sound, unless the class happens to have a very live and imaginative teacher; but when the same epithet or phrase means a change in physical grouping or in the obvious relations between two visible occupants of the stage, there is less likelihood of its being ignored, although even that is possible without a teacher with imagination. Another advantage is that even the simple material adjuncts, which sometimes help an extempore reading, suggest ways of improving them to boys who are more practical than literary, and the chance of showing what they can do in their own bent may interest them in that for which they are doing it. Still more, in more elaborate representations there is a union of activities which nothing else in a school can give: design, music, carpentry, stage management, economics, besides the give-and-take of a social enterprise and a healthy state of heightened emotion; and out of this union of activities aesthetic taste has its pickings. I think it would be fair to say that their share in a school production of Shakespeare has often redeemed for the actors much of the mortification they have suffered in reading him and his commentators at the desk. To begin as a stage hand would do no harm to many Shakespearean critics.

Some people object to casting Shakespeare before average boys of fourteen. They would probably agree with T. S. Eliot when he says: 'The only pleasure that I got from Shakespeare was the pleasure of being com-
mended for reading him; had I been a child of more independent mind I should have refused to read him at all. But he would have, I gather, been quite ready to act him, for he also says: 'The most useful poetry, socially, would be one which could cut across all the present stratifications of public taste—stratifications which are perhaps a sign of social disintegration. The ideal medium for poetry, to my mind, and the most direct means of social "usefulness" for poetry, is the theatre. In a play of Shakespeare you get several levels of significance. For the simplest auditors there is the plot, for the more thoughtful the character and conflict of character, for the more literary the words and phrasing, for the more musically sensitive the rhythm, and for auditors of greater sensitiveness and understanding a meaning which reveals itself gradually. And I do not believe that the classification of audience is so clear-cut as this; but rather that the sensitiveness of every auditor is acted upon by all these elements at once, though in different degrees of consciousness. At none of these levels is the auditor bothered by the presence of that which he does not understand or by the presence of that in which he is not interested.'

To say that there was no level at which the boy of fourteen could understand or be interested in Shakespeare would be to deny that a boy has any care for drama in the raw. One might as well say that he sees an ambulance stop at a neighbour's door and walks the other way. A death warning, a conspirator's meeting in the early hours of a very stormy night, a murder, a man in danger of being lynched and final vengeance to the sound of trumpets and with a ghost for announcer.
SUBJECT MATTER

There seems to be a level here on which the youthful film fan would find himself at home. Unlike the film, this crude framework also carries a cargo of ideas from a heroic kind of society; the kind of society in which the boy himself would find as acceptable an environment as in that which the local adults provide. A cargo, by the way, of intriguing verbal appearance: words from which and turns of phrase some boys will pick up with as much pleasure—occasionally with as much awe—as a handsome and unfamiliar postage stamp.

There are other dramatists than Shakespeare who can provide material for play-reading; but except for the interest of variety to the teacher, I do not see any valid reason for replacing best by second-best. The best will probably suffer least for the future; and in this best, as it happens, there is plenty of second-best for those who want it. Personally I feel also that there is a good deal of the schoolboy in Shakespeare, and in other Elizabethans as well; in many ways they seem to be verging on adolescence, at least, as we think of adolescence. According to some, it was a post-war generation of disillusionment. The theory gives to those absorbed in the present convenient opportunities of tracing ingenious analogies. But at least as far as this mentality is represented on the stage, psychological introspection for one sex had to be conveyed by the mouths of schoolboys: and though choir-boys may give a passable imitation of angels in biblical language, I suspect their power of conveying a dramatised version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or *The Lighthouse*. As T. S. Eliot says, 'In a play of Shakespeare you get
several levels of significance': some so deep they take a lifetime of experience to read—and doubtless, in shaping a Rosalind or a Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare may have had in mind their interpretation by a woman, and chose his words, so that while the subtle maturities of truth should be suggested by the uncomprehending enunciations of a boy, yet the boy should have the confidence of understanding a certain sense in what he said. The poet was respecting the dramatist's discipline. Further, what was expressed thus of one sex set a condition on what could be expressed rather than suggested by the other. Speeches in the same scene could not follow different formal standards. So, because an experienced eye may find underlying the rhetoric of Macbeth acute intellectual analysis of human motives, it would not be safe to assume that a boy who is incapable of such analysis is also incapable of being impressed by the play. In the rhetoric itself, owing to the conditions of the Elizabethan stage, is an emotional approach to understanding not far removed from the boy's experience. And I suspect that much of the understanding of a Shakespearean play seen, before being read, if that were possible, by the intellectual eye itself would come from the same rhetorical level.

I have said that there is something of the schoolboy about Shakespeare. I have in mind his playing with words, brilliant at times, at other times crude, but the kind of thing the well-grown-up man does not do: also his curious mixture of narrow loyalties and a breadth of view which sees beyond caste, class or other conventional accessories: his hearty enjoyment
of the material, his blend of superstition and devoutness: his freedom from the sentimental, his companionableness. These few statements are not meant to be a compendium of the qualities either of Shakespeare or boy; only to suggest for debate that there are points in common between them.

After fourteen adolescence, sometimes before; but these ages can only be approximate. Adolescence of fourteen to sixteen is an awkward age to provide with a nucleus for class reading. The boy is becoming conscious of a self. Sometimes almost to jealousy; a self disturbing in its emotional power and demanding for its existence its own judgments, or unfortunately what it takes with a little flattery to be its own judgments. At sixteen Romes are being built every day by the more energetic, pulled down every other day and defiantly rebuilt, each boy his own architect and using a varied assortment of material. Responsibility for the plan of the city is the boy’s, or should be—I am afraid it is often, mostly should be. The part of the teacher should be that of consultant on technical difficulties. Consultation will undoubtedly lead him to a share in creating the general plan; and in the solution of common difficulties of technique boys in class will gain insight into each other’s ideas—and life will give them few such favourable opportunities again for cooperative knowledge.

If this slight diagnosis is correct, it would seem that whatever attraction to literature boys of this age may have in common will depend very much on its power to give them technical skill in defining and expressing their ideas. As with a motor cycle, they will
with words first aim at riding them, and unsevering and reassembling them—that is, if they have any interest in them at all. For which reason the composition lessons would probably be the most suitable time for acquainting them with what is known as literature, as giving models and material for the practice of technique, and mostly in prose form or verse which has a prose character.

As this is an age at which physical change intensifies emotional activity, one might expect that the emotive use of language would have a greater appeal. To the individual probably it has; but as it now conveys ideas that have a more intimately realised personal relation, it is for private rather than for public reading, unless in public attention is fixed directly on the form and only indirectly on the substance. This may again be considered too dogmatic an assertion; it certainly has the weakness of all generalisations about the human being: it refers to the nebulous typical; and also it is based on experience with boys who before fourteen had had a rather commonplace, vague and unimaginative contact with poetry. But the fact remains that the early adolescent, whether he is dull and materialistic or idealistic and intelligent, tends to treat poetry, when in company with his fellows, with something very near a passing contempt, and much may be lost thereby. The danger is less, of course, the more impersonal in theme and treatment the poem. Nature and open-air poems usually seem to maintain interest, if the style is objective or in a classical mode. The reticence of that which is catholic is agreeable to self-conscious ears; and the fact that it is sometimes effected by an arti-
ficial convention of words does not seem to detract from its charm. The pastoral elegy such as 'Lycidas' even with its peculiarities, the descriptive ode such as Keats' 'To Autumn' (in contrast with his 'Eve of St. Agnes'), are more likely not to be damned in the eyes of fifteen plus than some modern hark-away tally-ho narratives; as the realism of the modern often means the intrusion of the self-conscious in a pseudo-naïve way, which the young critic laughs at and is the worse for it.

Undoubtedly much depends on the capacity of the teacher to produce the atmosphere needed for appreciative reading (vide p. 117 on 'Lycidas'); but such capacity granted, I would risk saying that he will find its use most effective in verse of the prose period from Dryden to Cowper. The formality of the heroic couplet, for example, with its skill in fitting the construction to the rhyme, its obvious skill, its unblushing artifice in the manipulation of ideas, and more than that, its description of everyday phenomena in a Sunday-best vocabulary, are things which interest the tyro. Also in public he is more at ease with a nymph than a girl,—but this may be merely a result of monastic education. One may object that he is being submitted to a jargon: but, at any rate, it is a jargon based on dexterity and a respect for ordered thought, and incidentally in such works as 'The Rape of the Lock' and 'Windsor Forest' it achieves great descriptive power. And however individualistic the tastes of the adolescent may be, unless he follows some law in expressing himself, he is confronted with chaos and is helpless. He can, if he has anything in him, transmute
the formal, as he wishes later; but its precision and coherence are useful at a time when he needs these qualities for other work, and to gain a respect for order through a respect for artistic form is less likely to damage independence of spirit than many of the other efforts which the school makes to produce it.

Perhaps in emphasising the use of eighteenth-century verse I have been consulting too narrow a taste; thinking too much of boys who have taken classics at school. To some such poetry may seem nothing but a severe medicine. Certainly, if a boy had had before fourteen a very thin poetic diet, and if after fourteen the individual were not making poetic meals of his own, it might be hard fare. But I do not propose it under those conditions. For the boy who is not studying the classics, though he may be taking Latin for the School Certificate, I feel that at this age English should provide him with a verbal discipline, if it is to be a successful course. This will be done mainly through composition; but what is read in class should give that mental exercise which the classical scholar gets in translation. Such exercise may be got, of course, from a variety of sources, from Lyly to Joyce. But I would distinguish here between two methods of appreciation; one through detailed analysis combined with written composition, the other through impressions gained both consciously and subconsciously through eye and ear of a continuance of subject matter. And it is this I have in mind here. From whatever period the subject matter is chosen, I feel that its emotional power should be socially conditioned and what may be called the artificial elements in expression be much in evidence.
This would, for example, include Spenser’s ‘Faerie Queen’ and exclude Keats’ ‘Hyperion’.

The reading of drama is usually continued at this age for examination purposes. It may be continued for other reasons. The drama is socially conditioned and as long as it was a serious method of interpreting experience sustained a formal discipline also. One may experiment in choice of playwright; the choice of play will be restricted by the type of subject matter. Congreve’s *Way of the World* in form of expression and as a social interpretation is a better play than Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer*. But it may require too mature an experience to be justly appreciated at sixteen. For the same reason Sheridan’s *Rivals* comes in where Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera* goes out. But when I referred to a play being socially conditioned, I did not mean that it should be a piece of social realism. The motives and actions of human characters living in a society romantically selected out of actual social conditions are a subject which may have a more valuable effect on the growing mind than the more limited characters of a realistic world. To develop judgments on a basis of what human nature is *in posse*, is a sound antidote to a premature prejudice of what it is in *esse*. And Shakespeare again suggests himself. But he might with an exceptional class be compared with one or two of his contemporaries, or with such a play as Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Vinctus*, unfortunately in translation. In any case, before any such comparison and attempt to evaluate subject matter must come attention to what is actually in any chosen play of his. At this age especially one needs to beware of borrowed judgments
that are a substitute for a knowledge of what the judgment is made upon. Even the poet in Shakespeare must be approached first from the dramatic conditions his poetry serves. One frequently sees criticisms of his lines quoted independently of their context. A speech of Hamlet, for example, may be evaluated according to the latest psychological research into behaviour. But that matters little until we have fixed its context with the particular moment in the general course of the action and with the intended effect on the spectator or on those who are engaged in the action with him. If the technique of the play is intelligently studied, the significance of the subject matter will be discovered by the boys in the manner best suited to each individually and to the suggestive power of the teacher.

After sixteen or thereabouts comes the age of specialisation. The value of its being introduced at that age seems to be in many ways questionable. The present results of spending the two remaining school years in a specialised type of subject are not such as to justify the neglect of a more general culture; and until the sixth forms of schools cease to be the forcing-houses of narrow ambitions in this, that, or the other subject, it is rather a waste of time to commend any particular English course for non-English specialists. It would be another matter if in mathematics or the natural sciences a boy learned something of the history of his subject and the interaction between mathematics or scientific ideas and changes in human society. The young scholar would not suffer in mental balance if he had some real understanding of the efforts of the alchemist or of the great faith in mathematics which
eventually led to d’Alembert and the Encyclopedia and by devious ways to the French Revolution. One cannot begin too early absorbing the axiom that the whole is greater than the part, the mind than the intellect. But, it may be said, what has this to do with English? Simply that the broadening of outlook would bring with it a taste for literature as something intrinsic in scientific equipment. English literature again could well engage much of the reading of the history specialist. At sixteen he is just approaching the age when history has the beginnings of any real meaning for him; and in the next two years the extent of such meaning will depend very much on the extent to which he can understand the way in which a human being thinks; and in my own opinion this understanding will be greater if he trains his capacity for research by studying the analysis of human conduct made by creative thinkers rather than the compilations whose first care is the maintenance of a particular historical tradition and second the demands of human reality.

Until such or similar changes in the curriculum take place, one cannot do more—so far as reading is concerned—than suggest for the non-English specialists as a possibility, that some period be set aside each week for the reading of what might be called a nucleus book. Such a book I would call Brown’s *Religio Medici*, Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, a volume of Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* or *A Joy for Ever* or a translation of Aristotle’s *Poetics* or a modern book on literary or aesthetic criticism, if it is tolerable prose; some book, in fact—and many will doubtless suggest themselves to individual tastes—containing a theory to be investigated
and in the investigation shared by a thoughtful and imaginative teacher introducing the reader to a wide circle of books.

If one engages in even simple comparative work between fourteen and sixteen, as comparing the structure of two plays or the treatment of a theme by two different authors, it is likely that the boy after sixteen will wish to increase his powers of comparative criticism. But if he has an examination at eighteen, in which he is expected to display a knowledge of literature out of all proportion to his experience, he is compelled to rely on superficial reading and judgments taken out of standard summaries. This system seems needlessly to interrupt a period in which a claim for continuity might be made on the score of mental development. There seems to be a greater metamorphosis in the mind after twenty or twenty-one than after eighteen. In the average man of to-day one does not expect mature work before twenty-one; and about that time very often the world, which he has built up as a faithful replica of the world of experience, vanishes in a disconcerting way, and for the first time he sets about in grim earnest examining the true foundations on which the structure of his life is to rest. He might do this more successfully if there were a more coherent preparation between the years seventeen and twenty-one. An ill-digested surfeit of books between sixteen and eighteen, and then between eighteen and twenty-one the addition of a philosophic method of knowledge to the flimsy second-hand judgments already acquired, can scarcely make for a sound mental constitution.

To suggest continuity between seventeen and
twenty-one may raise the objection that the functions of school and university are being confused. But there is no necessary confusion. At school one has not time to verify in any sufficient detail the ultimate value of the processes of comparative judgment one adopts. It is enough to form from limited data a method of assembling and discriminating between ideas, that is worth putting to a more exacting proof later—whether the later refers to a university or to leisure intervals in the earning of a livelihood.

Whatever views are held of the type of work to be done by the English specialist at school, when one considers the vast content of English literature alone, even since Chaucer, it is clear that some canon of selection is required. One can go by time and periods, a somewhat ironic process with 'immortals', were it not that their immortality is a thing for the boy to prove for himself. By the time he is sixteen, he should have some inkling of the pedigree of some writers; he will doubtless discover more in the next two years, but it may be wiser that he should do it incidentally. Literary history, when it becomes a convenient system, is dangerous. There is also danger in using literature to teach movements and the like generalisations. Something akin to the nucleus book suggested above might give judicious co-ordination for independent reading and favour the growth of critical discrimination and the power to discover principles underlying particular instances. Such central themes would be the focus for oral discussion, skeleton and full-dress essays and their criticism in class.

I suggest the following as a focal scheme for these two
years. It is quite conjectural, as I have had no means of testing it by experiment; but it might provoke opposition in the minds of those responsible for senior work, and opposition is sometimes an aid to thought.

Briefly, the scheme would be the conscious realisation of what, under my initial aim, had been practised all through the English Course, and was still being practised by the senior forms in their composition work. So it would be in a certain sense revisory. It would also be a continued training in how to read, as understood by a Gibbon or a Strafford. ‘After glancing my eye’, says Gibbon, ‘over the design and order of a new book I suspended the perusal until I had finished the task of self-examination; till I had revolved in a solitary walk all that I knew or believed or had thought on the subject of the whole work or of some particular chapter. I was then qualified to discern how much the author added to my original stock and I was sometimes satisfied by the agreement, sometimes armed by the opposition of our ideas.’ The boy, of course, extends his reading for himself according to his individual tastes; it is for the school to ‘arm’ him with ‘an original’, or rather nuclear ‘stock’,—it may be small in quantity, but it will be known so well that he has a defence against weakly accepting extraneous views at their face value, because he will have something by which to test such views, something which he has forged thoroughly to his own understanding.

The scheme, then, would begin by examining as simply as possible the ideas underlying what has been done in the course. There has been communication—a technical process combined with an exploring of
values. A definition of the process should be attempted; and of the most important terms that occur in it. The What and How communicated will clearly involve such terms as the senses, emotions, intellect, feeling and thought, and some knowledge of the working of the mind. For example, suppose a boy is considering what a mathematician is doing mentally when he is engaged on a problem. He may see that the mathematician, in following an argument each step of which is intellectually related to the others, may be also working with a good deal of excitement; that he may make jumps, as it were, beyond the logical limits he obeys intellectually. What he jumps to may be partly something he remembers; but what makes him choose one particular pattern out of his memories? How far is this choice affected by his emotions? This may be too ambitious an example: the simpler examples can be, the better, and the more a boy can examine his own experiences, the simpler. But I use it to suggest that at this stage some psychological definitions should be attempted. They can only be sketches for later developments, and they will serve their purpose if they help a boy to realise that when he is speaking of feelings, for example, he is not speaking of the senses. He may not be able to give definitions that are exact by an adult standard, but he can aim at exactness according to the standard of his attainment; and in so doing, realise that much depends on clear distinctions. He is bound to be using psychological terms in his work: it will be a natural consequence of an intelligent study of syntax. And instead of using them always incidentally and therefore vaguely, he would be helped
by having to stop and take stock of them. I think it can be done without making literature a serf to psychology.

The boy in expressing himself is also exploring values. If he has any intelligence, he wants to know when and why he expresses himself well. He will compare himself with others and among those others are the so-called classics. But communications are of such manifold diversity that comparison will be vague, unless he can begin by collecting for comparison what is homogeneous. He must classify. He may attempt classification by content or subject matter. But when he finds that a business letter, a sermon, a psychological treatise, a melodrama and a lyric may all have as their subject the same emotion, he may find that content in itself is no basis for classification; that the discriminating factor is the treatment of the content. He may then try purpose and method contingent on purpose as a way of distinguishing one type of writing from another. There would be little virtue except for the weak boy in this work of classification if he simply went to a textbook and read some rules and examples and then looked for others. To be a living thing, it must begin with a variety of material and a desire to sort it out into some kind of order which is logically as sound as the boy can make it.

Suppose, then, that he examines examples of a business letter, a political speech, a sermon, an advertisement, a mathematical proof, a scientific exposition, a lyric, an essay, a comedy and so on—and in what follows I give what I feel to be a probable line of procedure, but naturally it is only illustrative in detail.
He examines these communications to see whether he can classify them according to their purpose. He will probably find that they are mostly communications either for an immediately useful or a not immediately useful end: he will also find that it is difficult to assign some to either of these alternatives. He may find that he has on his hands a constantly increasing mixed residue: and he will have to review his idea of what he considers useful and what not. His final classification may be somewhat as follows:

Under communications made for some immediately useful purpose, he puts

The business letter,
The political speech,
The advertisement,
The sermon.

He may further define their purpose as being to promote action of some kind, and the means they use to achieve this as the inducing through words of an attitude of mind, the impact of will on will; and in reflecting on the idea of will he may realise how much the language must have an emotional bearing. If he is satisfied that he has a coherent group, he can then examine what qualities should be regarded as valuable in this type of communication.

Under communications made partly for a useful and partly for a non-useful purpose he puts

The Mathematical proof,
The Scientific exposition.

His decision may be guided by the particular instances
of this type which he has collected. Their purpose he may further define as being to promote abstract knowledge, and the means to this end, as being completely or dominantly intellectual. He may find it difficult to rule the imaginative use of language out of this group; he may suspect metaphor; but in so far as the group is to be considered as synonymous with the scientific, he will have a fairly clear idea of what qualities give this kind of communication its value. And while he appreciates that value, he may also, in considering these communications, become aware of their limitation or limiting effect on the nature of language and, with it, of thought.

Under communications for not immediately or non-useful purpose he puts

The lyric,
The drama.

The idea that anyone should express himself for some purpose which has no immediate use is one which is likely to puzzle a good many boys; especially as it is a habit characteristic of madmen. But in deciding on use, as an element in purpose,—they will have already met this disquieting alternative of the non-useful. They may have sounded the teacher on what they discover through him can be called metaphysical problems in connection with it. But they will probably feel that, if it could be explained in some further way, it would be less unsatisfactory. To call the non-useful disinterested or artistic, though it might meet with logical approval, would probably not remove an uneasy feeling that it was rather a poor and nebulous title
for a group. To say that the aim of such writing is to record the truth might seem more sustaining, as it has a flavour of the moral about it, and the moral savours of something practical. But the truth in this connection will need careful treatment. An artist seeks to express something which he in feeling and thought, by imagination and reason, apprehends as a part of reality. It may be a fly, it may be the melancholy of human affairs, both in a particular relation to himself through experience. What he apprehends is, for him, the truth, in the sense used here. His expression is also usually communication: he seeks to make someone else or himself consciously realise what he has apprehended. Again, what he apprehends is not merely an intellectual abstraction. It is a particular thing experienced by his whole being: and in order that any particular thing may be consciously realised it must have a certain formal context; and what this context is to be will depend on a personal selection. The content of what is expressed will be affected by the choice of the individual artist. This relation between the artist and what he expresses is one part of what we call his style. Further, if what he expresses is to live for others, if others are to apprehend exactly what he has apprehended, his imaginative thought, of whatever emotional intensity, must observe some forms of expression common to himself and others. Otherwise communication ceases—so far as conscious judgment of the process is concerned. But though he observes common forms, again he will vary them according to his individual predilection. The relation between the artist and the manner in which he expresses the content
of his experience is the other part of what we call style. For successful communication there must be harmony between these two parts of style. Content and form must fit one another. By what standard one is to decide what is harmony in style and what not is a problem that is likely to outlast the world. This is all to the good for the school; for, though a man has to take the plunge sometimes and make an irrational decision on this point, he should, as a boy, realise that the problem of values is not easy of solution.

So from classification we have reached a stage at which an enquiry into what is artistically valuable can be made, and the material for the enquiry may be taken from certain forms of communication which have been regarded as suitable for certain types of material, and this accepted tradition be critically considered.

Before outlining how this may be done, I wish to go back for a moment to what I have just said concerning truth, artistic expression and style. I have only there suggested the kind of thought process which might be initiated; I have omitted any specific method of procedure. This would have to be worked out with a simplicity of detail and close contact with 'concrete' example which would require a book in itself; and I feel that a simple aesthetic treatise would be indispensable to English work at this stage: as direct as Aristotle's Poetics and dealing with such questions as are raised in Middleton Murry's Problems of Style.

To continue—in this communal search for values, which is not a substitute for individual adventure, after a provisional classification of various modes of
communication, such as tragedy, comedy, the lyric, the novel and so on, I should be inclined to take tragedy as the first to be examined: as the mode in which individual taste has for many reasons to comply most with certain formal conditions; and so one might hope to reach some common standard of what is artistically valuable sooner in this form of communication than in many others. Undoubtedly any approach to such a standard will rest more on conscious intellectual approval than on subconscious affective conviction. This may give too much power to a clever and ambitious teacher; for the class, which believe in him, will assume that lack of emotional reaction in themselves is not a fault in communication, but a defect in reception. On the other hand, the fact that they are concerned in a common enquiry in which nothing, if the work is honestly done, is prejudged, should, if they are interested at all, give them a sense of critical responsibility. And I may repeat that the chief aim of the process is to learn how to become acquainted with an author, how to read and how to prepare oneself to find values in reality, as it is experienced by oneself and others.

Some definition of tragedy may have been made in recognising it as a distinct type of expression. And further enquiry may start from that point. In any case, I feel that it will have most life if it begins by taking what the boys regard as a tragedy within their experience, actual or imagined, of everyday circumstances; and if they provide sketches of such material, from examining these they may evolve a gradually clearer conception of what material they would call tragic in character and what not, or what
more and what less. They would probably soon discover that material could not be judged apart from its treatment; and as the traditional way of communicating such material has been by impersonation, its treatment is subject to strict conditions. Whether the traditional way is sound or not may be considered. It is a question of the stage or the printed page being the better means of communicating matter of great emotional as well as intellectual intensity, in which the actions of human beings are represented. The mind conceiving Paradise Lost may have been as emotionally intense as that conceiving King Lear. But is that intensity conveyed as successfully? Supposing that stage impersonation is accepted as the mode of conveyance suitable to tragedy, its conditions may be explored, and here such works as Aristotle’s Poetics or Dryden’s Essay on Dramatic Poetry may be useful as containing ideas to approve or condemn; and it is obvious also that some account of the main changes in theatrical representation will be needed to serve as a check in estimating the aesthetic value of specific tragedies. Linked with these actual stage conditions, one meets such questions as the suitability of plot and character; and with these, the question of the unities, and of diction; and all discussion of these points must have reference to their connection with the actual performance, if possible, of some particular play. Otherwise discussion will become a mere parade of second-hand words. Unfortunately one cannot often see on the stage a tragedy of note: and as a substitute, one will have probably to be content with play-reading, that is, reading aloud by the boys as a dramatic group
in as imaginative an atmosphere as possible. Such reading will be preceded and followed by individual reading; and I would suggest that it include about half a dozen plays, such as *Hamlet, Samson Agonistes, All for Love, Prometheus Unbound*; and a Sophocles, the *Antigone*, and a Racine, *Phèdre*, if translations of these are available: if the command of French is good enough to read the original, so much the better. Possibly also by way of contrast, Lillo's *London Merchant* might be read, and by way of satirical protest, Fielding's *Tom Thumb*. By a careful study of these plays, or better a jealous study, as though the boy were intending to create a tragedy for himself, he should be able to collect resemblances and differences. From the resemblances the class should be able to draw up a prospectus, as it were, of the essential conditions needed for the communication of a theme, such that it may be defined as a tragedy; and from the differences it may see how far it can agree concerning any author, that he has justified his variation of a standard form by the interpretation of reality which he has thus been able to make. As judgments should be the result of individual reactions to any particular play, reactions involving the whole individual, even approximate agreements may be difficult, especially as they mean a curtailment of personal independence; but even a sincere agreement to differ will be valuable, as in reaching it much critical exercise will have been undergone, and, one hopes, enjoyed. And it is most important that what may always be a failure to agree on values should be attempted with all zest; for without it an undue attention to dramatic form would obscure the
fact that it is only a means to an end; and the individual might actually be alienated from contact with what is of most consequence to him—the dramatist-poet’s ‘conception of ultimates’. Though in analysis comparisons between one dramatist and another are inevitable—in fact, without them one could not establish differences—in estimating the value of these differences I would suggest the taking of any one dramatist by himself and apart from others, on the ground that it is what the dramatist thought and felt and what the boy thinks and feels concerning the same things that are the first subject for comparison. Also, I have not suggested the reading of any modern play. This is not intended to exclude references to modern plays. The work of criticism would be dead without them; but though as much incidental reference as possible to them should be made, to use them as a basis for criteria might be rather like trying to lay the foundations of a house with gunpowder.

Comedy would naturally seem to be the next subject for a similar investigation; but I think it would be found that at least concurrently with it one would have to investigate the nature of poetry. The merits of verse and prose as media for tragedy will have been already considered; but of necessity, with a limited treatment, and one which could only be regarded as an anticipation of a fuller treatment, as soon as the chance occurred. The distinction between verse and prose will probably turn on a study of rhythm; but, before one has come to the deeper causes which differentiate rhythm, one will already have met trouble in making distinctions of a more superficial kind. The
Letter of Burke to the Duke of Bedford is prose; Walt Whitman’s ‘A Song for Occupations’ or T. S. Eliot’s ‘Journey of the Magi’ are verse: but on any metrical reckoning it would not be easy to say why one was to be called prose and the other verse. To substitute for prose some other word such as non-verse, though it would not make classification easier, might be convenient for other reasons. As it is, poetry may be written in prose, prose may be written in verse, but verse cannot be written in prose. This dual meaning of prose is confusing: and since the real contrast is between prose and poetry, the term prose might be reserved for that context.

A distinction between verse and non-verse may break down on the question of rhythm, and in any case will not take one far to a distinction between poetry and prose; but it may be a useful introduction, and an enquiry into varieties of rhythm may be a good way of exploring those other qualities found with certain rhythms and not with others, which belong to poetry and not to prose; emotional intensity, for example, intuitional processes of thought, transpositions or metaphors from one plane of reality to another, as it were, made by the imaginative power, which becomes active in certain emotional states, certain attitudes of communication, which may be natural, for example, in a person singing but not in one speaking. Some of these things may sound likely to confuse or bore even a senior boy; but in practice they would be met in a definite and particular shape—in examples of poetry and prose expressing similar subject matter—and consequently recognised under simpler terms. Narrative,
AN ENGLISH TECHNIQUE

speculative, ceremonial, didactic poems could be contrasted with prose of the same type: and finally one would come to the lyric, or rather lyric poetry; and here one would have not only a very sensitive criterion of what is poetic and what not, but also a type of communication which would bring into acute revision the whole question of relative and absolute standards of value in reference to both form and matter. Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* might make a nucleus work for this enquiry: also selections from the letters of Keats.

There is one other topic which must find a place in a critical review of modes of communication, and that is, fiction; and since fiction is the most practised literary art of the day, it will be useful to examine what formal conditions are necessary to its being an art. One might begin by comparing a novel and a play on the same subject, to see by contrast what general differentiation of treatment is necessary for a novel, or one might take a chapter out of a textbook on psychology and see what minimum alteration would be required to turn it into a short story. Supposing that thus some simple conditions could be abstracted, they would be soon put to a severe test when they were applied to existing novels, and when they had survived this application it would still be difficult to use them as a means to arrive at the relative artistic value of a novel. But it is not enough to leave appreciation to emotional responses. Appreciation would then become eventually merely another name for a temporary satisfaction, a diversion. On the other hand, it is true that a critical diagnosis of the form of a novel may not
directly affect one’s response to the novelist’s interpretation of experience. To know that Joyce’s *Ulysses* is sustained by a pattern of action borrowed from an epic may seem a matter of indifference to one who is responding emotionally to Mrs Bloom. But the epic pattern is to some the *sine qua non* of any response at all to the work. To consider whether adherence to the discipline of the objective is essential to the art of the novel may not seem more than an academic exercise, a thing of little reference to life. But problems of formal value are a centre at which novels from a very wide circumference can meet. In some segment of the conflict between classic and romantic one can gather such different works as *Tristram Shandy*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Rouge et Noir*, *War and Peace*, *Madame Bovary*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Crotchett Castle*, *Tom Jones*, *The Egoist*, *Vanity Fair*. And the fact that they are approached in such an atmosphere, very much intellectual perhaps, may be the cause either of their being read at all, or of their being read a second time and more often, as the years pass, with increasing enjoyment. A boy may privately fall head-over-heels in love with the heroine of a novel. And this emotional reaction may be for a time a stimulus to mental activity; but if she is so attractive, she will stand being met in public under the discrete concealment of a study in artistic form; and if she emerges successfully from that test she will be the source of more substantial pleasure and more permanent mental stimulus than she was before. Further, a boy may feel privately that a novel has revealed a profound and illuminating mind, with whom he is *en rapport*; then it should be either an attraction to
review how that mind has constructed this influential effect or a corrective to find that the profundity and illumination did not extend so far as to produce as artistic a work as they might have done. In brief, this group treatment of the novel may add to the pleasure of reading in private: and no less, to its intelligence. It may reach little certainty in artistic valuation: there is value in that itself. It will give a certainty, which is important at this stage of the critic’s development; the certainty of knowing what is actually in a novel. ‘The author of the book’, says Mr Lubbock in his Craft of Fiction, ‘was a craftsman; the critic must overtake him at his work and see how the book was made’.

In giving this sketch of a possible course for the last two years’ reading in school, I have had to treat classification as if it were possible to make it clear-cut without divorcing it from actual human experience; and I have had to trespass a little on method, but at the same time for the sake of brevity to condense the suggestions made, and, as a result, use general terms which in the absence of particularised illustrations may give the impression that the course would be too difficult even for senior boys and throw them into the danger of mistaking words for realities. That will depend on the extent to which the teacher is prepared to base his judgments and his methods on a live and adventurous contact with the printed page and the minds behind it; and on the extent to which he has the outlook certainly of a craftsman and possibly of an artist.

As a provisional distribution of time to different topics in the two years I would tentatively suggest:
1st Term:
Definition of process of communication with simple psychological reference.
Classification of types of communication.
Examination of 'useful' prose.

2nd Term:
Consideration of non-useful communications and mixed types.
Preliminary discrimination between verse and non-verse.
Classification of types of poetry.
Study of Tragedy.

3rd Term:
Study of Tragedy (completed).
Comedy.

4th Term:
The Nature of Poetry.
Lyric Poetry.

5th Term:
Fiction.

6th Term:
Revision: principles of criticism with more advanced psychological and aesthetic reference.