



The School

English Composition

CATHOLIC newspapers and periodicals of America are calling frantically for competent Catholic writers and they are being supplied with them very meagerly. The fundamental cause of this dearth of Catholic writers is frankly stated when we acknowledge that there are not very many men who know how to write; and, going back one more step, that educated men are ignorant of composition because their teachers have failed to realize that English composition should be taught in our schools and colleges as second in importance only to religion. It is thought frequently that any one is good enough to fill out the faculty of English, and this attitude is reflected through the inferior quality of our literary products. Goethe felt satisfied when he could say: "At length, after forty years, I have learned to write German"; and Josephus remarked that "late and laboriously did the Greeks acquire their knowledge of Greek." But, alas, our own age is exempt by pedagogical dispensation from the toil and discipline of literary apprenticeship.

English composition can be presented as a most interesting study if the teacher will take the trouble to establish clearly in the students' minds that the fundament of all writing is expression; that is, that writing comes from the inside, that it means the unfolding and revealing of the soul in some one of many thousand different ways; that, as Buffon said, "the style is the man." But the fact that writing is expression involves some stern corollaries very necessary to be observed by both the teacher and the student. Horace deduces two of them in his *Ars Poetica*: "Ye who write, choose a subject suited to your abilities," and, secondly, "Knowledge is the foundation and source of good writing." There is absolutely no use in assigning compositions which are beyond the scope and age or interest and environment of students. Somewhere Newman chided the ridiculousness of ordering a boy to write on the world in general; but it is every bit as ridiculous and much more common to direct young boys and young men to write on other topics quite as

elusive to them as the world in general. And the selection of such themes is not the fault of the student.

The first regrettable result which occurs when a student is applied to writing that which can not come from his own interior is that the student does not approach his work with an easy natural carriage. He is too much aware of the fact that he is writing to write well. A high degree of literary consciousness overwhelms his mind and introduces mental paralysis on the one extreme or caprice and mannerisms on the other. "The first postulate of an original literature," says Lowell, "is that a people should use their language instinctively and unconsciously, as if it were a living part of their growth and personality."

A great aid in cultivating this natural air in writing is to instil the advice of Cobbett: "Put down your thoughts in words just as they come. Follow the order of your thoughts." This, of course, does not vindicate rambling, unprepared papers. Cobbett supposes that any one proposing to write has scanned his information on the subject at hand and outlined the general progress of his thought. But the heat of composition will always incubate subsidiary ideas, images and expressions which could not have been foreseen and which must not be lost. Let them be planted on the paper; they can be eradicated easily enough later on if they are not acceptable. Such a method of composition should be especially encouraged in high schools where the self-consciousness of the pupils often offers a restraint to easy expression.

When the first draught of an article is completed the enthusiasm and dash of creation are over, and young people in particular are wont to be content with what is done. But if the teacher allows the students to deceive themselves into believing that good writing means quick writing, he is doing them a great wrong. "By writing quickly," advises Quintilian, "we are not brought to write well, but by writing well we are brought to write quickly." Real education and discipline are not given to the mind and firm shape and contour of expression and thought are not stamped on the paper until long after the first draught.

No man can snatch merit and grace in writing, but he can be taught to merit grace by effort and attention. In directing, encouraging and inspiring students to show the effort and apply their attention are found the duty and the excellence of an English teacher.