

The Importance of Poetry

(adapted from the introduction to The Harp and Laurel Wreath, Laura Berquist)

It is a temptation for teachers to save fine arts appreciation for days when religion, English, mathematics, science, history, geography, literature, and penmanship are all finished. The problem, of course, is that all of these things seldom get done. Therefore the introduction of beautiful pictures, great music, and excellent poetry remains an activity to do "someday".

This is a mistake, because the appreciation of fine arts is formative for the soul. The old adage "You are what you eat" could be changed truthfully to say "You are what you see and hear." The models in one's imagination and memory become a part of the soul and affect all the rest of life.

If the soul holds good, true, beautiful, noble, and heroic images, it will be inclined to love those things. Additionally, since whatever is true is also beautiful, an appreciation of the beautiful prepares the way for an appreciation of the true. If children love the beautiful they will be disposed to love the truth, as truth, when they are older. Thus, even in terms of intellectual formation, fostering the fine arts is important. Socrates, in *The Republic*, says it pretty clearly:

And further, because omissions and the failure of beauty in things badly made or grown would be most quickly perceived by one who was properly educated in music ["music" here includes all the fine arts], and so, feeling distaste rightly, he would praise beautiful things and take delight in them and receive them into his soul to foster its growth and become himself beautiful and good. The ugly he would rightly disapprove of and hate while still young and yet unable to apprehend the reason, but when reason came the man thus nurtured would be the first to give her welcome, for by this affinity he would know her.

We should foster in our children a love of the beautiful and true and a corresponding distaste for what is ugly and false. Children's sense of beauty can be encouraged in various ways; teachers may include beautiful art, music, and literature regularly in their curricula, in ways that are appropriate to the various stages of the intellectual formation of the child. Attention to such things will aid in the kind of intellectual formation that is the object of a good education because it will strengthen and inform the imagination, which must be developed in the right way to do its job well.

Poetry is one of the forms of the beautiful that is relatively accessible to children. Children respond to patterns of sound and enjoy the rhythm of poetry, if they are introduced to it before someone tells them they shouldn't like it. Poetry is naturally pleasant to the ordinary child, and pleasure is a sign teachers and parents should never ignore.

Children are very good at imitation because it is the way God intends them to learn. We need to keep this in mind for all areas of our children's development, moral and intellectual. Children need models of right behavior and of excellence in all the scholastic areas that are appropriate for them to pursue. The right use and richness of language is an area that is most appropriate for the formation of children. For this reason they should be exposed to the best examples of the use of language that we can give them.

Beautiful word patterns and sounds, the right choice of words, and methods of producing particular responses can be imitated by children who have had good models. Language development is significantly enriched by exposure to good poetry.

Additionally, in all of the fine arts, one of the chief benefits of appreciation is seeing the world through the eyes of the artist. His gift of observation is given to the student when the work is studied. It is as though the artist said, "Look, here is something really beautiful that I saw and want to share. Perhaps you missed it." For this reason a painting can be better than a photograph in drawing the viewer's attention to certain aspects of a particular scene, for example, the lighting or the composition of the figures. Similarly, poetry can be a better way to draw attention to certain truths or make some facet of an experience stand out. Excellent poetry will both direct the student's attention to these aspects of reality and model the best way to share that experience.

Also, poetry appeals to the emotions, as does music, and, like music, beautiful and rightly ordered poetry can habituate or train the soul to the right kind of internal movement. Familiarity with truly good poetry will encourage children to love the good, to hope for its victory, and to feel sad at its demise. The opposite habituation is very clear to see in children who watch or read stories in which the grotesque is taken for granted. They cease to be shocked by what is really disgusting. That is a great loss to the soul.

In addition to these reasons, which are true for all age levels, there are other, more specific, developmental considerations:

In the earliest years, the object of our curricula should be twofold. We need to teach basic reading, writing, and arithmetic, and we should encourage memory and observation. The basic skills are the tools of all further learning; memorization and observation are what children do naturally at this stage of development. It is through the use of natural inclinations that the intelligence is formed at every stage of development.

When babies are ready to crawl, you encourage and help them do just what they want to do. You put attractive objects where they can see them, so they will practice crawling. You don't put the toy too far out of reach, because that would be discouraging for the child. You don't put it too close, because that wouldn't provide enough practice. Instead, you make a judgment about just the right distance and make adjustments as the baby's ability grows.

Teaching children is like that. Little children are good at memorization; they pick up jumping-rope rhymes and doggerel verses without effort. Encourage this inclination and ability by having the children memorize fine poetry, among other things. This will strengthen the imagination and memory, as well as prepare the children for the subsequent stages of intellectual development. Since poetry draws attention to specific aspects of experience, regular exposure to poetry will reinforce children's observational powers.

In the middle years, seventh through ninth grade, children are ready to analyze. Summaries, grammatical exercises, both in Latin and English, and various categorization activities will encourage and improve analytic ability, as will the close examination of well-reasoned arguments. With respect to

poetry, the student at this level should try to turn poetry into prose. This exercise in simple analysis also begins to focus the mind on what is specific to poetry that differentiates it from other forms of speech. The teacher should lay this question before the child and not give him the answer too soon. Let him learn inductively, through many examples. This is how the mind is trained to think. If the answer is given too quickly, the student exercises his memory but not his intelligence. Left to himself, he will eventually come to see that poetry is not primarily intended to impart information, but to evoke a particular emotional response. The student who has come to see this about poetry on his own, through directed exploration, will have a much fuller and richer appreciation of the fact than one who has simply been told that this is so.

Though poetry is not intended primarily to impart information or to make an intellectual argument, there is a quasi-argument in the poem nonetheless. The poet moves the mind of the reader from ignorance to knowledge. The student's attention should be directed to trying to find and articulate that movement.

Further, continued practice in memorization will stretch the faculty of imagination. Like any power of the soul, repeated use of the power will improve it. Children who memorize regularly find it easy to do, and a good memory is a real asset to the intellectual life.

In the upper grades, tenth to twelfth, students should concentrate on learning how to present the logical arguments they are now able to make. They need to learn rhetorical patterns, and imitation remains an excellent way to learn. But there should also be a study of the method employed by others. Ask how an author achieves the effects he achieves, and have the students study those techniques in detail.

This is a good example of a general principle in education. First supply experience of the various types of whatever you are studying, exposing the children to many instances of the category. Then when they are ready, turn to a detailed study, which will be much more effective, and easier, because of the early exposure. This is not necessary to a good understanding, but it makes it significantly easier to acquire that understanding. Teaching Latin in high school to someone who has already memorized vocabulary and paradigms and is familiar with grammar is a breeze compared to teaching it to a student who has never done any Latin or whose grammatical knowledge is shaky. The same thing is true about teaching philosophy to students who have a wide acquaintance with history and literature. They are properly prepared to undertake the more difficult study, having experiences that give a content to the philosophical ideas which are now introduced.

In the study of poetry, the high school years are the right time to bring up basic poetical information, such as figures of speech, meter and rhyme scheme, and the classes of poems. Familiarity with many poems makes this an easier study, though one may undertake it without the earlier preparation.

Poetry is important in the intellectual development of children, and it is a pleasure as well; these are not unrelated phenomena.